THREE LITTLE CRACKERS FROM DOWN IN DIXIE

WILL ALLEN DROMGOOLE

George Washington Flowers Memorial Collection

DUKE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

ESTABLISHED BY THE
FAMILY OF
COLONEL FLOWERS

I4.
G
#200

A Happy Birthday
To Dear Weston
From Will and Lucile

Jan 20th 1904

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016 with funding from
Duke University Libraries

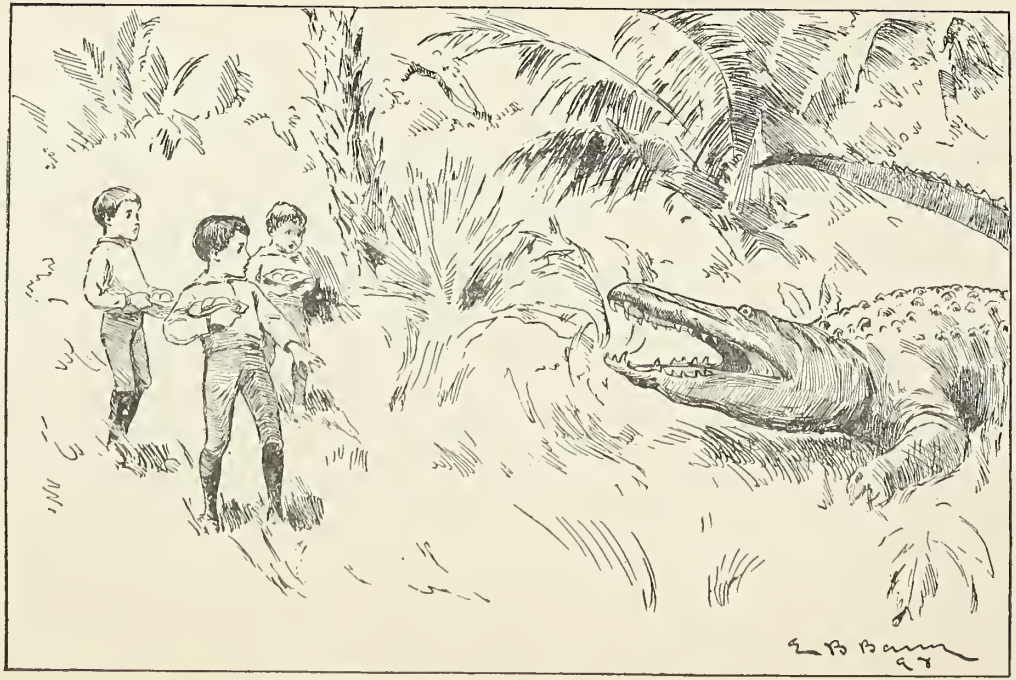
https://archive.org/details/threelittlecrack01drom

THREE LITTLE CRACKERS FROM DOWN IN DIXIE

GIFT BOOK SERIES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

Three Little Crackers	By Will Allen Dromgoole
Three Children of Galilee	By John Gordon
Miss Gray's Girls	By Jeanette A. Grant
The Fairy Folk of Blue Hill	By Lily F. Wesselhoeft
Little Bermuda	By Maria Louise Pool
The Wild Ruthvens	By Curtis York
King Pippin	By Mrs. Gerard Ford
The Adventures of a Siberian Cub	By Leon Golschmann
The Woodranger	By G. Waldo Browne
A Bad Penny	By John T. Wheelwright
Feats on the Fiord	By Harriet Martineau
Songs and Rhymes for the Little Ones	By Mary W. Morrison
The Young Pearl Divers	By H. Phelps Whitmarsh
Timothy Dole	By Juniata Salsbury

L. C. Page and Company, Publishers



"THE CRACKERS FORGOT TO STIR; BUT STOOD WATCHING THE MAD ALLIGATOR WITH A KIND OF HELPLESS FASCINATION."

(*See page 122.*)

THREE LITTLE CRACKERS FROM DOWN IN DIXIE

BY

WILL ALLEN DROMGOOLE

Illustrated by

ETHELDRED B. BARRY

BOSTON

L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY

(INCORPORATED)

1899

Copyright, 1898
By L. C. Page and Company
(incorporated)

Colonial Press:
Electrotyped and Printed by C. H. Simonds & Co.
Boston, U. S. A.

813.49
D786T

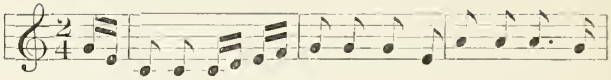
To My Friends

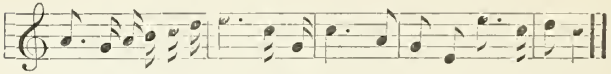
Captain and Mrs. A. J. Pharez

To whom I am indebted for much that inspired the writing of the story, and whose beautiful home at Yalaha has served it for a background, the

THREE LITTLE CRACKERS

beg to make their bow and pay their affectionate duty


In Dix-ie Land whar I was born in Ear-ly on one


fros-ty mornin, Look away ! Look away ! Away down south in Dixie.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Pioneers	13
II.	Col Alto, Indians, Bijou	26
III.	Adventures and a Rescue	44
IV.	Visitors: Cracker vs. Cracker	61
V.	The Old Blind Alligator	75
VI.	Who Stole the Bear-trap?	91
VII.	Hunting Alligator Eggs	108
VIII.	Jacko and the Eggs	125
IX.	To the Withlacoochee River	135
X.	Camp Life on the Withlacoochee	150
XI.	Getting Even; Bears; The Old Well	162
XII.	A Rescue; Two Famous Letters; Speech-making	177
XIII.	Bijou and the Alligators	197
XIV.	More Alligators	215
XV.	Into the New House	227
XVI.	Yalaha	238

PAGE

"The Crackers forgot to stir; but stood watching the mad alligator with a kind of helpless fascination" . . *Frontispiece*

Mr. Bus Joiner's first appearance . . . 19

Col Alto 29

"The Mate dropped knife and fork" . . . 32

"'Gophers!' sneered Jack. 'It's Indians!'" . 40

The Captain and the Mate 45

The three little Crackers started out to hunt Indians 53

"'Wildcats!'" 55

The Mate's flower garden 65

"He set off at a brisk trot, . . . the frightened boys clinging to his neck" . . . 71

"Word came that Uncle James was ill" . . 77

The old blind alligator. 83

The alligator wakes up 87

PAGE.

THE BOYS' FRIGHT 90
MINNOWS FOR BAIT 97
THREE LITTLE CRACKERS ON DUTY 102
ON THE LAKE 115
"A RABBIT RAN ACROSS THE TRAIL". . . . 118
IN THE BIG PUNCH-BOWL 127
JACKO AND THE EGGS 132
PACKING 141
A PHOSPHATE MINE 151
JACK ENDEAVORS TO CORRECT LUKE 160
MRS. JOINER. 164
"'BEAR! BEAR! BEAR!'" 167
IN THE PIT 175
GOING VISITING 181
JOE LENDS A HAND TO THE ENEMY 188
THE LITTLE CRACKER'S MAIDEN SPEECH . . . 193
"THE LITTLE CRACKER RODE OFF ON HIS LITTLE PONY" 199
MR. JOINER TALKS 202
THE TRAP FOUND. 209
WHAT KILLED THE ALLIGATOR 216
MR. JOINER'S FORTUNE 224
THE NEW HOUSE 229
THE LITTLE CRACKER HAS AN IDEA 234
THE STEAMER 241

THREE LITTLE CRACKERS FROM DOWN IN DIXIE.

CHAPTER I.

PIONEERS.

It was high noon of a day in January, when the steamer landed them, "dumped them," the pioneer's wife had said, at the point most convenient to their new home in the Florida wilderness.

There were five of them, not including Polly, the parrot, who really ought to be included, since she was doing more talking at the moment of landing than any one member of the party.

First, there was the Captain himself, the leader and head of the party, who had once been captain of a steamboat, had prospered,

inherited a fortune with his wife, in the uncultivated lands of Florida, and was now moving his family there to take possession. There was the Captain's wife, and there were *the boys*, three of them, three brave, eager, inexperienced young pioneers. These made up the company "dumped" upon the landing that morning in January.

In their Alabama home, which they had left for the Southern wilderness, the boys answered to the names of "Joseph," "Jimmie," and "Jackie." But the Captain's wife, as a stimulus to the boys' courage, had shortened the names at the moment of departure.

They accepted their abbreviated names as a part of the life upon which they were about to enter, — a life that was to have its pleasures and its adventures, without those extreme hardships which usually fall to the lot of the pioneer.

The change of abode had been necessary, the physician said, because of a consumptive tendency in both branches of the family, that had suddenly given hint of something serious. This hint decided the Captain at once to remove to Florida, where his wife's brother had gone several years previously.

"And our boys shall be pioneers," said the mother, when the three pale young fellows protested against going. "They shall be pioneers, and help to open a way in the Florida wilderness."

The "pioneer" idea was fascinating to their young minds, as the mother knew it would be, but the old life was not without its fascinations also. The brothers had not made the exchange without more or less regret.

It was *en route* that Jack, the youngest, offered his last protest.

"It is like not being a boy any more," said he, "to be moved off into another country, and to be called just 'Jack.' I tell you now, mother, 'Jackie' is good enough for me."

"Why, who ever heard of a pioneer called 'Jackie?'" laughed the Captain's wife. "Why, I think that would suggest a baby, rather than a brave pioneer."

She knew that Master Jack had really offered his objections to the abbreviation only since James, the second son, had, in a spirit of teasing, scratched upon a box belonging to his brother, "A Jack — Paris S," and left it so, with that long, suggestive hyphen between the names.

The Captain's wife had not dared to smile, so she said:

"Who ever heard of a pioneer called Jackie? Or even Jackson?" Anticipating Master Jack's reply.

Upon which the three, to the Captain's great amusement, had set up a wild shout of "*I* have!" "I have!" "So have I!" "Where's Old Hickory?" "Remember Old Hickory, mother."

"And so I do," said the Captain's wife, recovering her ground. "But I remember the great warrior who opened the way for the white man in the Florida wilderness, was not called '*Andy;*' but because he was so brave, 'so tough,' the soldiers said, that neither Andrew, nor Jackson itself, was strong enough, they called him 'Old Hickory.'"

And after that no more was said against the new names, or rather the nicknames, and the boys landed by the steamer that noon in January were ever after known as Joe, James, and Jack, the pioneers.

The Captain stood amongst his plunder, boxes and barrels and great bundles, and began to take an inventory.

"Everything here," he announced, after a

moment's calculating. "Everything here, except the Cracker, 'Bus Joiner,' who was to meet us with his team. Shall we wait for him, or go on? The house is but a short distance back; up there among those moss-hung live-oaks."

"And leave our goods and chattels?" his wife demanded.

"Nobody to bother," said the Captain, "and we can be getting acquainted with our new home while waiting for Mr. Joiner. Come, boys; everybody take a load, and forward, *march!* I am Captain of this company."

But the Captain's wife quietly seated herself upon a great roll of bedding and proceeded to make a remark, the result of which was the name by which we shall know her throughout these pages.

"Captain," said she, "I shall not desert my possessions. Remember we brought with us, on the steamer, only those things absolutely and immediately necessary, *and* our valuables. Why, sir, my great-grandmother's silver is a part of this luggage; I shall not desert it, sir. If *you* are Captain, please remember that *I am Mate.*"

At this the boys gave a cheer, in which the

Captain was forced to join. A cheer which continued until the "Mate" rose from the bundle of bedding, seized the Captain by the arm, and pointed down the long, level opening in the hammock land, an opening that was soon to be christened "the road," towards a queer shambling concern that was lazily creeping along through the deep white sand.

"What is it?" said she. "Man or beast? Captain, will you please to give a name to the *something* that approaches our landing?"

The Captain laughed.

"Why, Sue," said he, "that is a genuine Florida Cracker, a semi-tropical, native growth. And he is no other than Mr. Bus Joiner, better known to himself as 'Bus J'iner;' and he comes to help us to our cabin on the hill up yonder."

"But, father," said Joe, "if that is Mr. Joiner, what is the rest of him?"

"The rest of him," laughed the Captain, "is his team. That upon which he rides is the horse, or rather mare. She is blind, and so he has *belled* her. The conveyance attached to the mare, and worked upon wooden wheels, is a wagon; those red, white, and yellow trappings are strips of cloth and old rope; he calls them

his *gear*. Quite an original turnout, to say the least of it. Take a good look, and do your commenting while he is at a distance. Not a word about the team in the owner's hearing, understand."

The "good look" showed them a rude wagon-bed hoisted upon wooden wheels, and drawn by a lank, lean, clay-bank mare, fastened between the shafts with rope and strings of every size and color. The mare was blind, and from her long neck swung an old cow-bell suspended by a leathern band.

Astride the mare, long legs dangling, feet almost sweeping the ground, face covered with a coarse, sunburnt beard, long hair falling on his shoulders, and keen, sharp eyes fixed upon the waiting group, sat, in all his glory, "Mr.

Bus Joiner," better known to himself and family as Mr. Bus J'iner, the Cracker, with whom the Captain had boarded while superintending the building of his dwelling during his former visit, — before he removed his family to Florida.

"A genuine Cracker," said the Captain, in a low tone. "Take a good look, boys. That may be a specimen of what you are coming to."

"A genuine Cracker," repeated the Mate, in a lower tone still, as the curious-looking turnout drew nearer. As it stopped, and the man prepared to dismount, a voice from the luggage cried out shrilly:

"A genuine Cracker! Ha! ha! Joe, a genuine Cracker!"

"Polly wants a cracker; give it to her, Joe," the Mate came to the rescue at once; so that 'Mr. Bus J'iner' never for one moment doubted the bird was calling for a bit of flour and water.

The Captain made the company acquainted, and, while they were loading the wagon with the goods, which Mr. Joiner called "you-unses truck," they proceeded to make themselves *better* acquainted.

"This reminds me," said the Mate, "of the landing of the Pilgrims."

"The which, mu'm?" said J'iner.

"The Pilgrims, — they were a handful of brave folk who came to this country a long time ago — "

"And found nothing but savages," interrupted Jack, before the Mate could stop him.

"Plenty un 'em roun' here," said the Cracker.

"Savages?" cried the boys in a breath, unheeding the Mate's warning winks.

"Woods full un 'em. B'ar, wil' cat, deer, 'possum, gopher, painter, rattler."

"Oh!" again came the triple exclamation. "Oh, but that's good!"

"Will you tell about them, sometimes?" said James.

"Lots."

"And maybe you go hunting?" said Joe.

"Lots."

"Have you ever killed a bear?" said Jack, his eyes wide open with wonder and admiration.

"Lots *an*' lots."

"And maybe you'll let us go hunting with you," said Joe. "Father has brought guns, and ordered two rowboats, and says we are to be brave pioneers, and learn all about the wilder-

ness. *Would* you let us go hunting long—" Joe glanced at his mother, and then at the friendly Cracker; he wished to put himself upon a safe footing, yet he stammered ever so little before he said—"long o' you-uns?"

The confusion of loading the wagon drowned his mother's words to all ears except those of Jack. "You little Cracker!" he heard her say; "you-uns air a reg'lar little Cracker already."

At this moment there was a startled exclamation from Mr. Joiner, who dropped the box he was lifting to his shoulder with a crash, and went running off to a safe distance behind the wagon.

"What's that?" he shouted. "What's that varmint in the box? Hit laffed,—oh, Laud, it laffed, and put hit's han' out fur ter shake—What's hit, what's hit, Cap'n?"

Then the boys raised a shout that all the Mate's winking and frowning could not quell. It was too absurd. A little brown, bald face was thrust from the box, between the slats that had been arranged for ventilation; a set of tiny white teeth were exhibited in a delighted grin,—there was a funny little titter, the same that had sent the burly Cracker to cover, and

Polly, from her cage behind the bedclothes, sang out:

"Pretty little Jacko! Pretty little Jacko! You're a Cracker, Jacko. Poor little monkey!"

The Captain sat down beside the boys, and laughed until he had to hold his sides. The Mate alone kept her dignity.

"It is only Jacko, Mr. Joiner," she said. "He is our monkey, and cannot possibly do any harm while in the box. We keep him chained always, or try to, for when he gets loose, he generally manages to do a good deal of mischief. Put him in the wagon, Joe. And now, Mr. Joiner, if you will lift that bundle of bedding up, and now the parrot's cage, — look out for your fingers; Polly is worse than Jacko, — and now, I think, we are ready to start. Wait! There is my roll of oilcloth left; let me get it. This reminds me of a story I once read about a —"

"Mother!"

With a cry of horror James sprang from his place upon the loaded wagon, and, seizing his mother's arm, dragged her back from the landing before the others fairly comprehended what he was doing. As he did so, the bundle of

"oilcloth" gave a turn, and slid back into the water.

"Sakes erlive!" drawled the Cracker, "ef 't warent a 'gator!"

The brown "roll of oilcloth" was a hideous, slimy alligator that had come out for a noon bath in the sunshine.

"Shouldn't wonder ef 't war the blin' 'gator," said Mr. Joiner. "But Laud! the kentry's full uv 'em. Got ter look sharp, *I* tol' you. Look out thar, missus. Ye're trompin' on a rat—" With a shriek the Mate sprang to the wagon, and seized the cotton lines.

"A rattlesnake?" she shouted. "Get up! Get away from here! Take me back to Alabama! to Halifax! to Jericho! *Anywhere*, but Florida, alligators and rattlesnakes."

Then the boys *did* laugh; so did the Captain; even the Cracker showed his long, yellow teeth in a grin, while Polly lent a mocking "Ha! ha!" to the chorus. And the Mate, looking back, at last understood the Cracker's warning.

"Yeou ware trompin' on a rat—"

"Drive on!" she commanded, in all the grandeur of offended dignity. "Drive on, sir."

There was nothing for it but to obey; but

under the Cracker's yellow beard his lips parted in a smile that developed into a chuckle after awhile, and he whispered into the yellow tangle that "the fine missus ware about to tromple on a rattlin' big turkle,"—meaning one of the large gopher land-turtles, with which the pioneers were destined to become better acquainted.

CHAPTER II.

COL ALTO, INDIANS, BIJOU.

THE new arrivals moved into their Florida house, arranged its furnishings, and began to feel at home. One morning, about a week after their arrival, the Captain said to the Mate: "Now, Sue, lay aside high notions, and name the place, if it *must* be named. Let it be 'Cabin Home,' or something else as appropriate. Consider the situation."

"The situation is precisely the point I *am* considering," said the Mate. "The house *is* of log; seven rooms. As to the furniture, there is a Queen Anne set in one room, and queen somebody else in another. On the walls there are copies, *good* copies of Dürer, of Guido, and of Raphael; to say nothing of my Cleopatra, made directly from a copy *of* a copy of Correggio's original. Then, there is the silver to give lustre to our cabin home. That silver belonged to my great-grandmother, sir. I tell

you we are somebody, Captain, notwithstanding the fortunes have set us down in the wilderness. Yet, setting aside past grandeur, and present possessions as well, I shall do as you say, 'consider the situation.' And so, considering, I christen our home Col Alto; high hill. Where are the boys, Captain?"

"Gone to Drake Point with Mr. Bus Joiner, to see their uncle. Now, Sue, what next?" said the Captain.

"'Next,' the horses. If we could have put Bijou into a trunk and brought him along with us, I should not feel so helpless," laughed the Mate. "One cannot accomplish much without a horse in a country without cart-roads. Yet, I fancy it will be pleasant living, in this glorious climate. I hope it, at least, for the sake of brother James, and the dear darlings."

And the Mate sighed as she arranged her old Alabama silver on the home-made sideboard. She had suddenly remembered that her invalid brother had not been so well of late; had not indeed been well enough to pay them a visit yet in their new home, to which he was most anxious to welcome them, since it was he who had persuaded them to move to Florida. The two men, the Captain and

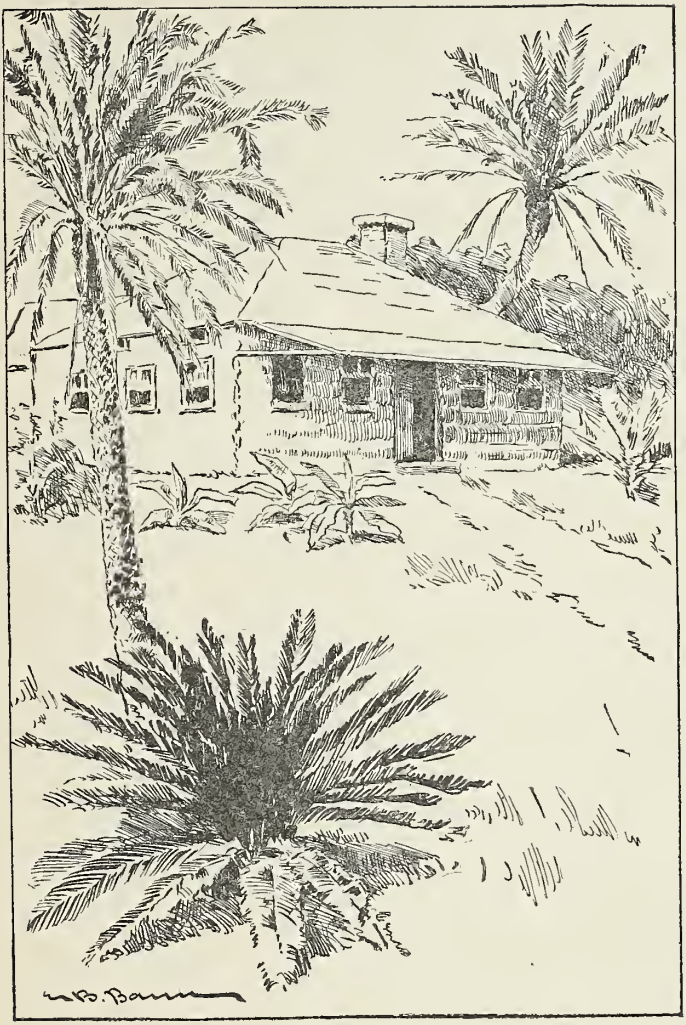
his brother-in-law, had bought up most of the land around them, and had boarded with Mr. Joiner while they helped to build the cabin that was to be their home until they could see "what was what," and, perhaps, by and by build better.

The little Crackers liked their Florida home from the very moment of landing.

Perhaps you may complain that the boys were not *genuine* Crackers, since they were born in Alabama, and not in her backwoods, either. But they came to Florida so early, before she was half settled, and became so truly her citizens, they were disposed to believe themselves genuine Floridians, at any rate. It was the Mate who first called them Crackers, for the reason that they formed such intimate friendship with Mr. Joiner that they very readily adopted his dialect and manners. Or would have done so but for the Mate's continual "nagging," as she called it.

They came home from their uncle's at the moment when supper was put upon the table. The same moment in which their mother announced the name of their new home, *Col Alto.*

"Uncle calls his place 'Drake P'int,'" said Joe, as he opened a fat potato with his knife.



COL ALTO.

"'P'int!'" screamed the Mate. "Wherever in the world did you pick up such English?"

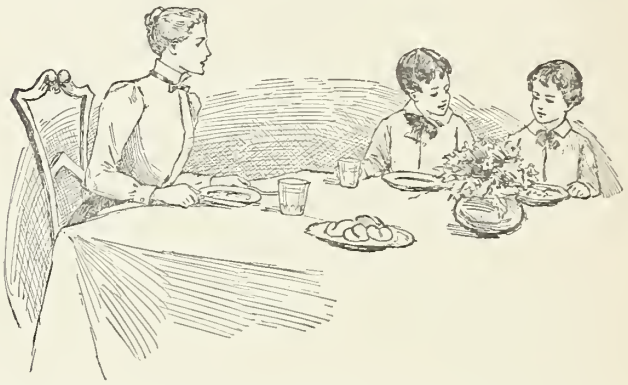
Joe blushed and made no reply. He knew as well as his mother did that he was indebted to Mr. Bus Joiner for the new pronunciation of Drake Point, his Uncle James's beautiful tract of land, consisting of the famous Florida hammock land, that wild tangle of live-oaks, gray moss, wild plum and orange, and of the stately and health-giving pine land, farther up from the Point where he had built his home. The Point itself projected into the lake upon whose shores the families had decided to cast their lots. They were wealthy people for those times, and would at once set about the making for themselves of a home. Already a wharf was planned for Drake Point, and several acres of wild orange-trees had been budded with the sweet fruit; the "little leaven" that was to leaven the great forest. For boys who live in Florida soon learn that a sour orange-tree, a natural, wild growth, is easily converted into a sweet one by budding it with the latter.

Uncle James had come to Florida two years before the others, and, therefore, as the boys said, "had got the start of them." By the time the wharf was ready, — there were piles to be

driven, and the timber for them was still a part of the forest, — there would be a crop of oranges ready to ship from the new grove.

The boys were intensely interested; not so much in the appearance of the fruit, as in the *disappearance* of the hammock.

"Uncle is clearing up all the hammock land on his place," said James. "Mr. J'iner says



there won't be a b'ar left in the country if the *swammocks* are cleared up."

The Mate dropped her great-grandmother's knife and fork upon her plate with a great clatter.

"A what?" she demanded, the twinkle in her eye contradicting the frown on her brow.

"Now you've done it," laughed Jack. "There

are *lots* of bears left yet, mother. We are going out hunting next week, after our things come. Mr. J'iner says there are lots of varmints left. His wife ketched one in a trap last week."

The Mate dropped her hands in her lap and laughed.

"Oh, you are three little Crackers," said she. "Why is it that boys alway pick up the objectionable, Captain, can you tell?"

"'Human natur,' as J'iner would say," growled the Captain, under his beard.

"Well," said the Mate, "though I don't like to admit it, I will have to own that I have here three Crackers. And Crackers they are until they learn good old Alabama grammar. Joe is my *big* Cracker, Jim is the *middle* Cracker, and Jack is the *little* Cracker. Now that we all understand how the matter stands, we will not have our nerves shocked with 'b'ars,' and 'varmints,' and 'p'ints,' and the 'ketchin'' of wild animals. We will just remember that it's only a trio of little Cracker children talking to us, and since they know no better we will try to expect no better."

The Captain laughed at the look of dismay on the faces of the boys; the Mate, too, had a twinkle in her eye, but to the boys it seemed

rather a serious thing to be labelled "a Florida Cracker" at the beginning of their venture. But labelled they were; from that moment the Captain and his wife spoke to them and of them as the three little Crackers; and, after awhile, Uncle James heard about it, and soon he began to call them so, too; and one day, when the Mate received a letter from far-away Alabama, and the writer of it said, "Give my love to the three little Crackers," then the boys knew the secret was out. "All over the world," the *big* Cracker said, since Aunt Lizzie knew about it. Though the *little* Cracker "reckoned old Alabama war'n't everything, if Aunt Lizzie *did* live there," while the *middle* Cracker "allowed," as Mr. Joiner expressed it, "in and about the best thing to do was to make the best of a bad bargain." A way the dear little Cracker No. 2 had of accepting unpleasant things; and it was this same trait, "making the best of it," that made for him a place in this little book, by the side of the boy who always rushed into things, and the boy who was always ready to run away from the unpleasant.

But all this will come in, by and by, and has nothing to do with the talk at the supper-

table that night, upon which the Crackers received their name.

Despite the chat and the jokes, the Captain felt uneasy. The household goods had not arrived, and the scouts, who went out to look for the wagons the day before, had failed to put in an appearance. There were Indians along the road they were to travel, — friendly, 'tis true, but not too honest. Old Tiger Tail had his camp at Okahumpka there, and while the old chief was honorable enough, there were always sneaks among the redskins. The wagons must come directly through Okahumpka, and should have passed that village several days before.

"It is the horses that may tempt them," said the Captain. "They would not dare molest my men, unless it be to secure the horses. An Indian will risk his scalp any day for a good horse."

"If they bother Bijou I'll have them arrested for horse thieves," said the *little* Cracker, ready to rush to the rescue of his pony, the tricky, but gentle Bijou.

The Mate laughed.

"Who is to arrest anybody in this wilderness, I should like to know. No, *little* Cracker,

you are perfectly helpless to prevent it, should a covetous redskin be seized with a desire to possess your pony. *Unless* you should appeal to old Tiger Tail himself, and I doubt if *he* could find the thief. Captain, you don't think the men could have lost the road?"

"No," replied the Captain. "Roads are too scarce in this county to ever offer a danger like that. Couldn't miss it; that is what makes me uneasy."

"And Bijou," Jack was thinking. "If an Indian wants him, he has only to nab him. And he is off out there in the woods where *they* are. And of course they want him; who wouldn't want Bijou?"

He thought about it during the next hour constantly. Try as he would, he could not get his mind away from the ugly danger — that seemed to grow more ugly and more threatening the more he thought about it — threatening his pet.

He did not heed, if he even heard, his mother's plans for the new home. The hammock was to be cleared away between the house and the lake, giving a full view of the blue, sun-kissed water that stretched for nearly fifteen miles beyond the bluff, upon which, by

and by, the *new* house was to be erected, if all went well with them in the land of flowers.

Until then, the cleared space was to be an orange grove; though there was to be a wharf, and two rowboats for the boys, and, *by and by*, with the new house, there was to be a yacht for the Mate.

The present house stood upon a great hill, at its highest point, that went down in a graceful slope to the bluff that marked the site of the future home.

"Mother," said the *big* Cracker, "isn't the bluff of sand?"

"Yes," replied the Mate, "all Florida's sand."

"Except the part that is sand-*spurs*," said the *middle* Cracker, at which all joined in a laugh, except the *little* Cracker, who was busy trying to devise a means of rescuing Bijou from the followers of old Tiger Tail, the Indian chief, located at the village of Okahumpka. Jack heard neither the plans, nor his brother's bit of wit.

"Well, mother," Joe went on to say, "ain't you rather building your new house, then, on the sand?"

"'*Ain't*' I?" said the Mate. "No, *big* Cracker, it is not built on sand, but on —"

"Air," chimed in the *middle* Cracker.

"Kaolin," said the Mate. "Kaolin that will one day be shipped to England's china manufactories, I tell you; and then we shall be rich."

"Another castle built on air," laughed the Captain, as he passed his cup back to be filled with coffee.

"Built on kaolin, you mean," said the Mate. And it was just at this juncture the *little* Cracker dropped his fork and shouted:

"*I* know! *I* know how we can do. Won't you, Joe? Won't you? And James?"

The Mate set the Captain's cup aside, and said, "*W-e-l-l!*" in a most surprised tone, while the Captain dropped the hot waffle he was lifting to his plate into his lap, instead. The two older Crackers stopped operations upon hot biscuit and Florida syrup to inquire, with their eyes, if the *little* Cracker had suddenly wakened out of a very bad dream.

It was the Captain who finally inquired:

"What is it, Jack? Are you dreaming?"

"No, sir," replied the *little* Cracker. "I wasn't asleep. I only just furgittened to rickerlict what I ware a-doin' uv."

At this unexpected burst of Cracker elo-

quence, the Mate arose at once and dismissed the company. This mattered little to the boys, however, since they had "eaten as much syrup and biscuit as they could furnish storage for," so said the Mate, and there never was a boy yet who cared to sit at the table when the storage was all taken.

Moreover, that mysterious outbreak of Jack's impressed them oddly. Something lay behind it all. Jack was a great schemer, and evidently there was a scheme on hand. They had great respect for the *little* Cracker, whose busy brain was ever devising some rare adventure such as boys delight in.

"Jack ought to have lived in the time of Daniel Boone and belonged to his band," James thought; though Joe insisted he "ought to have followed Old Hickory against the redskins," and both felt sure it was all owing to his name, Andrew Jackson, that Jack "thought up so many brave things."

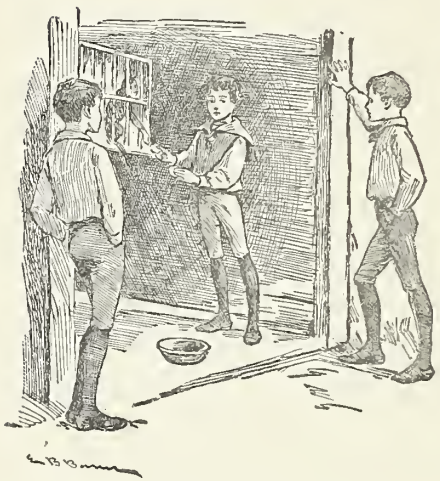
Anyhow, Jack was the proper stuff for a pioneer, and they felt sure he would "show Florida *some* things before he let her go."

So, upon leaving the dining-room, the two older Crackers sought their brother, who had

gone out to the shed at the back door to give Jacko his supper.

"Say, Jack," said Joe, "what is it you're going to do? Hunt gophers or salamanders?"

"Gophers!" sneered Jack. "What do I want with gopher tortoise? Mother makes the soup, I don't. And I ain't going to hunt salamanders, either. It ain't any of these, —*it's Indians!*"



"Indians?" cried the others. "Why you can't."

"Why can't I? I've got a gun, and plenty of shot, and it's night, and they don't know I am on their trail. Besides, it ain't Indians, exactly, it's Bijou. I'm going to look for Bijou. I don't say the Indians have got him, but, if they have, they've got to give him up, whether old Tiger Tail makes them or not."

"When are you going?" said the *big* Cracker, full of the great scheme that reflected so much of the old hero for whom his youngest brother had been called.

"Right now; to-night," said Jack. "Soon's I can load up and fix."

There was a slight hesitation, very slight, however, on the part of the *middle* Cracker.

"I don't think mother would *quite* like to let us," he faltered.

"If you're afraid, stay at home," said Jack. "We're, Joe and I, going to wait till everybody is asleep, so as not to make mother uneasy, and then take our guns, and slip off in the moonlight. It is bright as day these nights, — just the nights for spying Indians."

"Besides," said Joe, "I don't believe mother would care. She said we were to be pioneers, and learn to shoot, and ride, and to protect ourselves and her. She hates a coward, — I've heard her say so dozens of times. If we are brave enough to fight Indians who steal our horses, and murder our hands that father brought from Alabama, she wouldn't try to keep us from it. I know mother."

"Yes, *we* know mother," said Jack, "and

we know ourselves, Joe and I do, and we are going off to rescue Bijou and the men."

"Suppose — *we* get lost?" said James, yielding at last to the thrilling temptation, — for what boy hasn't been fired with a desire to fight Indians at some time in his life? To be sure, they were farther removed than were these against whom the three daring little Crackers were planning a crusade, yet they doubtless seemed very near and very real to the readers of Fenimore Cooper, and the lovers of old Kit Carson. "Suppose we get lost in the hammock somewhere?"

"Can't," said Jack. "Didn't you hear father say how plain the road was?"

"Boys!" the Mate opened the door and called. The silence which followed their "Yes, mother," might have argued their consciences were not altogether as satisfied upon the subject of their mother's approval of the plan on foot, as their nimble tongues and boyish fancies would have made believe.

"Boys, bring Polly in, and see that there is wood in the kitchen for morning. And don't forget the water. Remember, mother is cook until the wagons come."

They went about their duties cheerfully,

and with alacrity, and, when all was ready, and the clock in the Mate's room had struck eight, they crept away to their beds, their plans all perfected, to wait until the father and mother should fall asleep before starting out upon their raid against the Indians.

True, there was no danger to be apprehended in that line, though there *were* dangers, frightful and unseen, threatening the little adventurers, who, as yet, were strangers to the wild Florida forest and its inhabitants.

CHAPTER III.

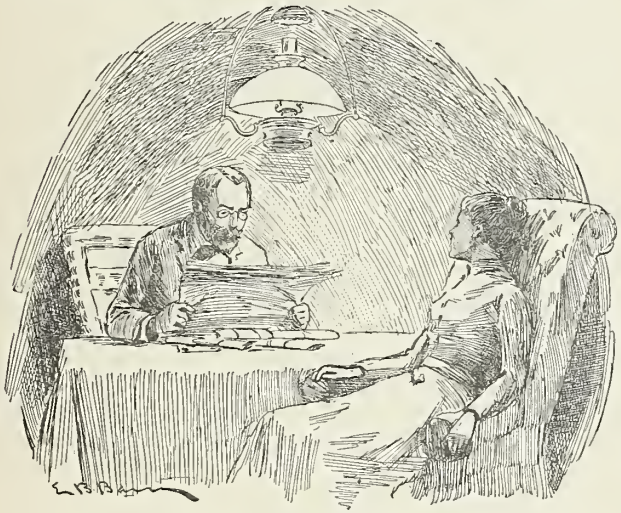
ADVENTURES AND A RESCUE.

The Captain seemed unusually wide-awake that night, the three boys in the big room joining the sitting-room thought.

And the Mate had fallen asleep in her chair (they could see her through the open door, by stretching their bodies as far out of bed as possible) three different times, and each time had awakened with a little low laugh to tell some joke upon some one of the three little Crackers.

"Captain," she roused up once to say, "those boys remind me of a bric-à-brac collector, in the way they pick up odd bits of English, *if* it be English. I heard the *wee* Cracker, to-day, telling how many deer Mr. Bus Joiner had 'skint.' And the *middle* Cracker told of a bear that 'clomb the palmetto-trees, and et up the palmetto cabbages.' While Joe, to crown the list of wonders,

declared that 'if the Governor of Alabama should ever drop in on us here like he used to do in Alabama and challenge father to a hunt, he meant to bet him he couldn't shoot wild ducks on the *flew* to the equal of Bus Joiner, who shot 'em on the flew easy as nothing.'"



The Captain laughed; he knew the Mate would, by and by, straighten out the English, and it *was* funny to hear the little Crackers experiment with the dialect of Mr. Joiner.

The Captain went on with his reading; for there was but one boat each week, and the

steamer that came that day had brought in a packet of papers and letters.

The steamer came up the Ocklawaha from Jacksonville, and they must rely upon this for everything until, so the Mate said, the railroad came; or else the orange trade should become heavy enough to demand a daily steamer by which to ship the fruit.

Another castle, the Captain said; but he, too, had built great hopes upon this castle, as well as the Mate, who had fallen to nodding again while the Captain read.

Suddenly she started up.

"Did you hear anything?" she asked. "Anything moving in the boys' room?"

The Captain listened a moment.

"No," said he. "All seems to be quiet in there."

"I *thought* I heard moving," said the Mate. "Cautious moving, as of some one carefully trying to walk about without being heard. The boys are asleep, I suppose?"

"Long ago," said the Captain. "What could keep their tongues still beside? And I believe I shall follow their example. I am tired out with rooting up palmetto sprouts."

The Captain was true to his word; in a

little while he was fast asleep, and the last light in the log house on the hill had ceased to shine.

But the Mate could not sleep; the drowsiness that had caused her to nod in the big armchair was all gone. That sound of cautious, bare, or muffled footsteps heard in the boys' room still disturbed her thoughts and drove sleep from her eyelids. She attempted in vain to reason herself into content and quiet again.

"They are good boys," she told herself; "they would not be guilty of any disobedient or unmanly tricks."

But this did not bring sleep. Finally she arose and went to the window, for, although the month was January, the weather was warm, and the window — secured against the armies of blind mosquitoes that inhabit the lake regions — stood wide open.

Below, beyond the clearing just made in the hammock, stretched the quiet waters of the lake; the lake that in the daylight responded to each touch of sunshine by ten thousand thousand sparkling dimples.

In the soft light of the moon its beauty was no less perfect, only that it was a gentle, sub-

dued beauty, like the beauty of some people who have grappled with life's misfortunes until the struggle has made their faces strong, and calm, and confident; the very best of all beauty.

It had a melancholy about it, too, — that still, moon-mellowed water. Beyond it was her old home, her kindred, her first friends. Then it set her thinking of another vast stream that rolled between her and that *other* home; the last home she would sail away to when done with all earthly dwellings.

Thinking of these things, she forgot her uneasiness, and when she crept back to the Captain's side at last, it was to drop into a quiet sleep, dreamless and undisturbed.

Meanwhile, where were the three little Crackers, and what were they about?

After waiting as long and as patiently as they considered it possible to wait, they decided, in whispers, to steal out at the back door while their parents were still awake. Joe had taken the leadership now, as was usually the case. It was Jack who suggested or conceived the wonderful adventures, Joe who executed, to a certain extent, and then it fell to James to take matters in hand, and either

push them safely through or else to engineer a wise retreat.

The first thing to be done was to set the door ajar. The doors were never locked at night, so there were no qualms of conscience as to subjecting their parents to any danger through leaving them open. The guns were set carefully outside, propped against the cabin wall.

The Crackers made their other simple preparations hastily and noiselessly. Joe tiptoed in his bare feet to the chair of clothes, and tossed two suits to the two boys in bed. They slipped into these without leaving the bed, while Joe was getting into his, after having carried three pairs of shoes and stockings to a place of convenience beside the door where they could seize them in passing, and put them on when they were safe on their journey. It was the scraping of James's shoes against the door, as the owner went out with them in his hand, that had reached Mrs. Parish's ear, and well-nigh upset their plans, spoiling the whole adventure.

At last, however, they were out; the moon shone bright enough; a typical night, as Jack had said, "for spying Indians," provided the

Indians were not disposed to a similar amusement.

Below them, like a sea of silver, lay the lake, with that one clearing, made by their father's men, opening to the white kaolin shore. Around them closed the hammock lands: a gray wall of forest, with the gray moss, wrapped from tree to tree, and from bough to bough, swaying lightly in the soft lake breeze, until it appeared as if the entire forest were gently rocking itself to rest in the night wind.

Directly through this jungle ran a long, straight road, the only opening to be seen.

"Father was right," said Joe: "there's no mistaking the road."

"But I wish it didn't go through *that*," said James, indicating the hammock; "it looks too wildcatty to suit *my* taste."

"*Will* you hush?" exclaimed Joe. "If you expect to find thieving Indians stretched out in the moonlight waiting to be scalped, you'll find yourself on a mighty cold trail, as Mr. Joiner says. We've got to plow right through that hammock, and we don't want any wildcat tales to help us on."

"S'pose one *should* come, anyhow?" said Jack, who, having donned his shoes and stock-

ings, began to feel that the real adventure was now truly close upon them.

Joe interpreted the suggestion to mean an ebbing of courage, so he said, slyly:

"Well, if it does, I'm afraid poor Bijou will be et up before we can get there."

Jack's courage came bounding back on the instant, for Bijou was his own special property.

"Oh, hurry up!" he exclaimed. "I'm not afraid of a little woods-lot like this. Joe! James! Do come on and save poor Bijou."

And, following Jack's lead, they entered the hammock, each Cracker grasping his small gun firmly, and each Cracker ready to die for his sake on the instant. At least, each one thought so.

"It's awfully still," said Jack; "seems like you could hear our feet a mile off."

"Don't talk," said Joe; "it might make — might scare the Indians off."

For a few minutes there was silence, save for the almost inaudible sound of their feet sinking into the soft, white sand, — the sound which "might be heard a mile off."

"I wish we had brought Mr. Bus J'iner along," said James. "He likes to hunt Indians, I reckon, for I asked him yesterday if

he did, and he said he 'ain't jist p'intedly ever fit any, so to speak, but he liked to *hunt* better'n pizen.'"

"Maybe he's out in the woods somewhere now," said the *big* Cracker. And the suggestion gave new courage to his followers, as he had intended it should. Silence again. Then Jack, inconsistent *little* Cracker that he was, spoiled, absolutely wrecked, the entire adventure, robbing it utterly of its glory by saying:

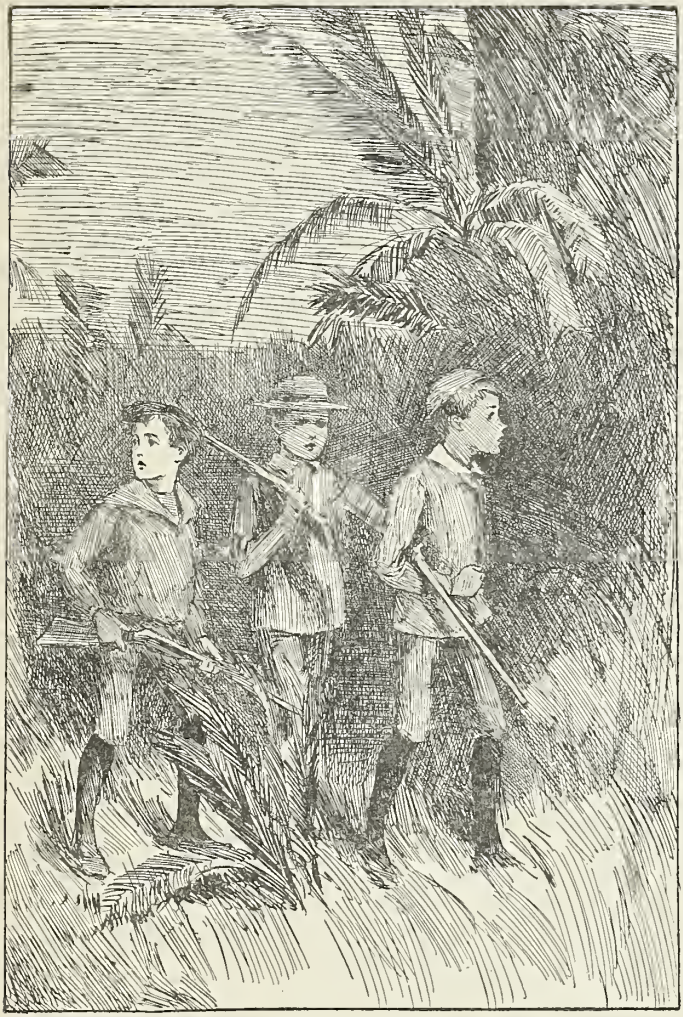
"I wonder what mother is doing right now?"

"Didn't I tell you not to talk?" said Joe. "Maybe you want Bijou et up by Indians."

Nobody spoke after that, for more than half an hour. Yet, though they tramped on bravely to all appearances, in each little Cracker's heart there was a thought which neither their ambition to shine as heroes, nor their affection for the endangered Bijou could put aside:

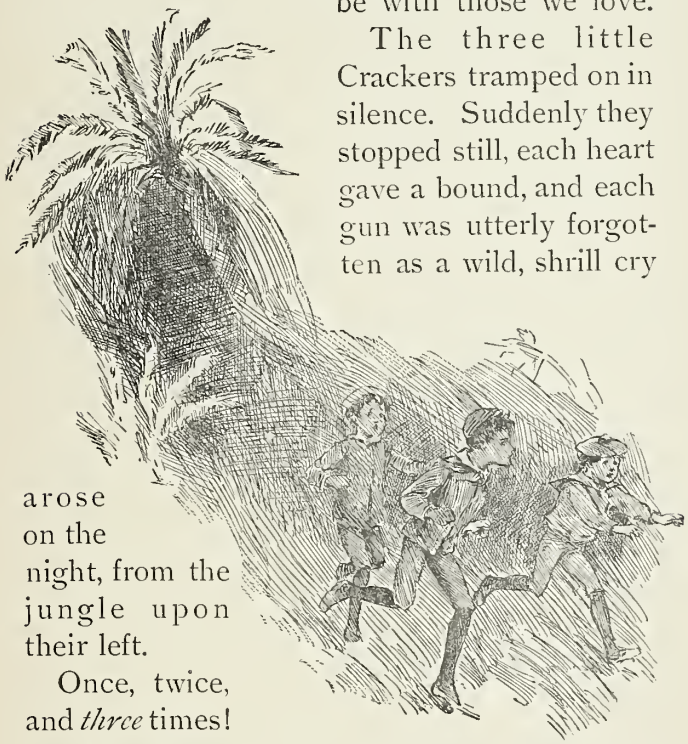
"What is mother doing?"

One of life's great lessons had come to them there in the wilderness, thoughtless little wanderers, had they but known it. It is not what we ourselves suffer at the moment of our keenest sorrow that makes it so hard to bear;



THE THREE LITTLE CRACKERS STARTED OUT TO HUNT INDIANS.

but it is the reflection that, but for some careless or sinful act of our own, we might, among different and happier surroundings, be with those we love.



The three little Crackers tramped on in silence. Suddenly they stopped still, each heart gave a bound, and each gun was utterly forgotten as a wild, shrill cry arose on the night, from the jungle upon their left.

Once, twice, and *three* times! And then every single one of them broke and ran before the awful cry of "Wildcats!"

Without thinking of their course, they had,

however, run forward, possibly because the cat had cried from the brake slightly in their rear.

It was James who finally restored something like order in the ranks, but it was when they were beyond the sound of the hungry cat's voice.

The boys were willing enough to turn back, but they were *not* willing to pass that jungle. Joe was for breaking a way around to the lake, and following that until they reached home.

"That means to get lost," said James. "We'll do nothing of the kind. Besides, we couldn't get through to save our lives. I tried it with Mr. J'iner. He says 'no man living can get through a Florida hammock without an axe.' No, sir, we're in it, we've got to make the best of it. We've got to either stay here, press on, or turn back. There's no sense staying here to be et up by wildcats."

"Don't talk," said Joe, softly.

"I *will* talk," declared the *middle* Cracker; "it's talking keeps off scare, anyhow. There's no sense staying here. *I* ain't going back *that* road until Miss Cat has had her breakfast. Jack, are you whimpering? Well, you sit here

and cry, while I go on and save Bijou. Maybe I can do it by myself."

And *then* the adventure passed, as usual, into James's hands. When James set about "making the best of things," the others always retired into the ranks of the privates.

He began by, as he expressed it, "setting up a tune." That is to say, he *whistled*, that boyish dodge for fear, and anger, and heartache. God bless the boy who can stifle his wrongs and unrest in an innocent, cheery whistle!

The others could only stare in amazement while they listened. It seemed such a daring thing to do, as if inviting all the wild things of the forest to an attack.

They tramped on this way for about a quarter of a mile farther, each Cracker grasping his gun firmly once more, and each ready to run at the word *boo!*

Then the leader stopped,—among the palmettoes there was a commotion of some strange description. Something was ripping away the leaves and bark, to an accompaniment of a low, delighted growl.

"Bear," said Joe; "he is getting the palmetto cabbage."

"Easy, now," commanded James; "the cab-

bage *may* satisfy him, and it may not. You may tip it through here."

But they found it necessary to "tip it" farther than they had expected, for ever and anon the sound of the ripping away of bark came to them as they passed near a group of palmettoes.

At last the moon disappeared, and then, indeed, the full significance of their adventure dawned upon them.

"If we could only get to the opening before it is entirely dark," said James, "there will not be any danger, except from Indians. And if *they* attack us we can't treat them like we did the cat, — we've got to *fight*."

They did reach the opening while there was a glimmer of moonlight. Before them lay a stretch of open marsh-land, from the centre of which came the uncertain glimmer of water. A lakelet, they supposed it to be, but Mr. Bus Joiner had told them so much of the dangers that clustered about these beautiful but treacherous pools, they decided not to venture any nearer, but to remain where they were until daylight.

This was easier said than done, for behind them, in the dreadful hammock, they could still

"hear sounds," which they did not dare to interpret.

They spoke in whispers, resolved upon but one thing *surely:* if a bear should attack them, they meant to kill it.

Day was breaking when a noise overhead caused them to look up.

From the top of an oak-tree, which had probably been a storehouse for wild bees, coming straight at them, with business in every movement, they saw an ugly, full-grown she bear.

There was consternation indeed. Jack dropped his gun and showed, distinctly showed, flight. James was the first to grasp the situation fully, and his well-balanced brain responded at once to the necessity of action. He grasped his own weapon a trifle more firmly, and, turning to Jack, said, with a great show of authority, pointing to the gun:

"Pick it up!"

Which order was promptly obeyed.

"Now," continued James, "when she starts towards us don't anybody shoot but Joe. Joe is our best shot. Hit her in the eye, Joe, then I'll follow if you should miss her. Then Jack can come. All ready there! There she comes! Joe, why — don't — you *shoot?*"

And then, as the bear turned towards them, with a half grinning "good morning, breakfast," in her face, the three Crackers dropped their guns and took to their heels, while the bear trotted lazily back into the hammock.

Verily, the boys ran as for their lives. They ran with such vehemence and with such energy that they almost ran *into* a small caravan that was headed towards the hammock through which they had made their night march.

The caravan had evidently stopped for breakfast beside the lakelet, though in the uncertain light the boys noticed nothing except that there were men, Indians, perhaps, in the crowd.

"Down in the grass!" commanded James; "that's the way to fight Indians, always. We'll have to snake it back to our guns and then fight."

"Where's the grass?" laughed Jack. "Oh, but you're a dandy fighter not to know our" (Jack had heard a familiar sound coming from the group of supposed savages) "Bijou from a horrid redskin!"

And, with a shout, the adventurers rushed upon the caravan, where, indeed, pretty Bijou, the beloved pony, safe from Indian malice, was waiting to welcome his master.

CHAPTER IV.

VISITORS: CRACKER VS. CRACKER.

AFFAIRS were progressing satisfactorily and pleasantly at Col Alto. The weather was delightful, "delicious," the Mate said, and in the cabin on the hill there was an air of home already, now that the household furniture had arrived; there was a cow in the stable, a wagon under the shed, two mules in the field, two rowboats on the lake, Bijou in his stall, and plenty of hands in "the grove." For already the cleared ground, that had been a hammock six months before, was spoken of now as "the grove." A small lakelet at the foot of the hill on the south side, had been converted into a fish-pond. And just beyond that, the Captain had set his banana grove.

The Crackers had confined their adventures to daylight since their crusade against the Indians, or else in close company with their friend, Mr. Joiner, whose only business in life

seemed to be scouring the woods for game, or the palmetto cabbage, that delicious vegetable, free to all, man and beast, who care to have it, or else fishing in the lake for the trout so abundant in those waters.

The Indian crusade was a sore subject with the boys for a long time.

Somebody had written about it to Alabama, for, in every letter received from Aunt Lizzie, inquiry was made as to whether there had been any more "crusades against the Indians," and she spoke for a "wampum belt" for her cabinet of curiosities, whenever the crusaders felt they had enough to spare her one.

As to who wrote, it wasn't possible to say. They half doubted it was their mother, for she had seemed so sober when the exploit had first come to light, and had impressed it so soundly upon them that *anything*, adventure or venture, requiring such secrecy as theirs had required, *savored*, to say the least of it, of wrong.

"Daylight is always the best light in which to undertake doubtful measures," she told them; and then kissed them all around, and went out with them to pat pretty little Bijou, and to drop a tear or two on his white coat,

when nobody was looking, — a tear for the old days in pleasant Alabama.

Then Mr. Bus Joiner had had a word to say in regard to the adventure, when he came over the next day to "fetch a couple o' duck meat" he had "kilt on the flew," and had been told of the midnight raid against the reds.

"Stayed all night in the swammock, did ye? Waal, I'm proper glad a 'gator didn't get ye, or a painter. The swammocks air plumb swarmin' with painters, an' catamounts, an' yother wil' meat. Wonder ye didn't git yersives et up. Swammocks is fur varmints, not folkses, — less'n they-uns wants ter hunt; then it be the fittenest place top side o' creation, I reckin. How many Injuns did you-alls kill, anyhow?"

The Crackers grew very tired of the raid before they heard the last of it. And it was a long time before they heard the last of it, there being so little *news*, and therefore so little else to talk about.

But one day it entered into the brain of "Mr. Bus J'iner" to carry out a threat of some standing, — to "fotch his fambly over fore shortly" to pay them a visit. And the visit

did, much to the delight of the three little Crackers, turn the tide of talk, for quite a while, into other channels.

It was one busy morning, when the Mate was giving orders concerning the flower-gar-

den she was about to have laid off, and the Crackers were waiting for William, the hired boy, who had followed them from Alabama, to take them out upon the lake. William was teaching them to row, an accomplish-

ment to which, the negro declared, they took like ducks to water.

They were impatient to be off, and, in consequence, were making themselves generally unpleasant company about the place.

"Uncle James promised to meet us at the Point at nine o'clock," said Joe. "And it is already past eight. Mother, *can't* William come now?"

The Mate lifted her head from the bed she was laying off with a slender little garden rake. There was a decided spirit in the manner in which the head moved, and a *very* decided look about the eyes, when once the head was well up. Then, on the instant, the decided look vanished, and in its stead came one of wonder, not unmixed with mirth, while she asked, her eyes fixed upon the road:

"What *is* it? What on earth *can* it be?"

All eyes were instantly turned upon the advancing wonder. It consisted of a horse, a long, lank claybank, familiar to their memories as having helped them from the landing the day of their arrival, upon which was mounted Mr. Bus Joiner. There was a familiar tinkle of the cow-bell, too, as the claybank tossed her head.

There was a new wagon, with "sure enough" wheels, but minus a bed. Perched upon a pole sat a queer little woman, short, fat, and jolly-looking. She wore a short blue "kaliker coat" that showed her feet and ankles, and the "split" sunbonnet tied about her ears did not conceal the laughing, good-natured face of the Cracker's wife.

There were the two boys, Jake and Luke, perched upon some other part of the wagon, "wrapped around just like Jacko," the *middle* Cracker whispered Joe, as the boys began to *unwrap*, and the driver, or rider, called "Whoa, thar," to the blind mare. He stepped cautiously down from the claybank, and the Mate gave herself a vigorous pinch before she went down to the gate to meet "the family."

There were two boys in the family, — two "wild goats," the Mate called them after they left, — and so the trip on the lake had to be abandoned for that morning.

The Crackers felt very like rebelling, but a look from the Mate, and a fear of offending their old friend, who had piloted them through the "jingles" and the "swammocks," and who had promised them further adventures, both by land and water, restrained them.

While the Mate entertained Mrs. Joiner in the sitting-room, the little Crackers took the boys around the place to see "you-allses things," as they had requested them to do.

They had no sooner appeared at the back door, however, than Polly set up a cry of:

"You're a Cracker! You're a Cracker! Ha! ha! ha!" And one of the Joiner boys threw a lemon peel at her, striking her on the head, which so enraged the *little* Cracker that he would have rolled up his sleeves and avenged the insult to Polly then and there but for James's interference.

"Come on away, Jack," said James; "you can't fight company."

"Then company can't fight Polly," declared the namesake of Old Hickory. "Manners is manners, and company is company."

"Well, come on and see the monkey," said James, and the quarrel was soon forgotten in the antics of Jacko, who grinned and chattered, and rubbed his stomach, and reached his long arm out in an effort to touch the tangle of yellow hair that crowned the heads of the visitors.

"Kin hit bite?" asked Jake, the oldest of the Joiners.

"Put your finger in his mouth and see," said

Jack; upon which the little brown fingers were extended towards the monkey with such innocent enjoyment that Joe sprang forward and jerked them away before the delighted Jacko could touch them.

"Don't you know any better than that?" he demanded. "Why, he'd make sausage meat of you in no time, *just.*"

"*He* telled me ter," said the boy, pointing to Jack, who had rolled over on the ground to laugh.

"Have to do everything you're 'telled,' I reckon," said Jack. "Well, then, I tell you to wash your hands when you go home; they need it."

"Jack," said Joe, "if you don't let up, I'll tell mother. You know these boys don't know any better."

An apology which threatened to do more damage than Jack's advice had done, until James hurried a second time to the rescue.

"Let's go to see Bijou!" he exclaimed, as if the bright idea had but just come to him, and Bijou's stall had not been from the outset the very point of all interest towards which they were making their way, — *via*, so to speak, Jacko, Polly, and the fish-pond.

"Let's show them Bijou, — they're bound to like Bijou," said James.

And like him they did, — what boy doesn't like a fat, fleet-footed pony? Bijou was one of the very fattest and fleetest that ever set hoof on Florida sand. The visitors were so delighted with the pet that Jack's feelings concerning Polly were entirely soothed.

"He's a slicker," said Jake; "yer jes' bet he's a slicker. Kin hit trot?"

"Trot?" said Jack. "He can trot and pace, and single-foot, and *lope*, and *run*."

The visitors opened their eyes in admiration. Luke, the younger boy, put out his hand and patted Bijou's nose, at which the pony lifted its head and bit at the crop of yellow hair that had so fascinated Jacko.

"Oh!" said Luke. "You git back."

The boys laughed aloud.

"Mistook it for hay," said Joe. "Better keep your crop out of sight."

At this the boys again showed fight. It was very plain the imported Crackers and the genuine Crackers would never stand upon friendly relations.

"Hit's tricky, anyhow," said Jake. But this toss of the gauntlet fell unheeded, for James,

quietly stroking the pony's pretty neck, said, caressingly:

"He's an Alabamian, he is. He's got good blood in him. Like to try him?"

The question created excitement enough, but finally the visitors admitted they would just like to "take a set on his back a minute, case'n they were afeard o' strange nags."

Afraid indeed. It required all possible coaxing to induce them to mount. Bijou was led outside, and, after much persuasion, the visitors allowed themselves to be "histed up to hit's back."

No sooner were they up than Jack, who had been waiting the opportunity, whistled, and gave the pony a slight prick in the side.

It was quite enough for the restless Bijou. He set off at a brisk trot towards the lake, the frightened boys clinging to his neck and to each other, screaming "Paw! Paw! Maw! Aw, paw! Run here, paw! Quick!" while the others stood, holding their sides with laughter.

Out came the Mate, Mr. Joiner, and his wife, while William left the flower-bed and ran to rescue the frightened riders.

The Mate had a suspicion as to how matters

"HE SET OFF AT A BRISK TROT, . . . THE FRIGHTENED BOYS CLINGING TO HIS NECK."

stood, and quickly despatched William, who caught the pony and released the boys.

But in the minds of the Joiner parents there was never a hint of treachery on the part of the three little Crackers.

"Them young-uns o' ourn is venturesome," the father declared. "I 'lows they ull git inter mischief yit, ef they ain't keerful, an' git the'r necks broke; an' then they ull see ez they ain't so smart ez they lays they be."

The Mate had sent the hired man to take the boys out in the boats.

"Put Jack and Joe in one skiff, and in the other take James and the two Joiners," had been the directions. "Under no circumstances allow Jack and the Joiners to go out in the same boat. Joe can row one, and you must go in the other. No matter what the boys say, these are the only conditions upon which they can go on the lake."

So "upon these conditions" they went. It was the first time the Joiners had ever been in a boat, but it was not the last, by any means.

Whether it is boy-nature to "take to water," I am unable to say, but that row with the three little Crackers opened their souls to the delights of the water to such a degree that

they soon learned to row, and more than once in the days that followed, when a rowboat was missing, the cry might be heard coming from the neighborhood of the landing, "The Joiners have got my boat." A trespass which served to broaden the breach which their first meeting had made and which all time was destined never to heal.

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD BLIND ALLIGATOR.

If there was one thing the Captain and his wife had endeavored to impress upon the boys more than another, it was the danger to be apprehended from alligators.

The lake was full of them, as indeed were many of the lakelets; those little harmless-looking pools that are to be found in any of the low, marshy lands in which Florida abounds. The three little Crackers were encouraged to fish, hunt, and row; but swimming in the lake was emphatically forbidden.

The only one who ever thought of disregarding these admonitions was Bijou, whose special delight, whenever he managed to escape the stall, was to take a plunge in the lake, swim around awhile, and then come out again with a shake of his glossy head, as if the forbidden pleasure had been a special delight.

"The blind alligator will get him some day,"

the Captain said, whenever such a disobedience on the part of Bijou was reported. "The old blind alligator will get him yet, if he doesn't keep out of that lake."

The blind alligator was a great, ugly creature that had been seen by the natives for years lying along the lake shore, warming himself in the sunshine on the white kaolin banks. Frequently he had been shot at, although nobody had succeeded in killing the pest, whose depredations were becoming both frequent and alarming, and whose teeth, Mr. Joiner declared, would "fetch a round sum down to the Jacksonville jeweller shop."

The creature was totally blind, and was supposed to be deaf as well, since it had been known to lie asleep on the lake's shore until almost stumbled upon by passers along the shore.

Many sins were laid to the charge of the blind alligator. Missing pigs, a crippled cow, a butchered calf, always called forth the exclamation:

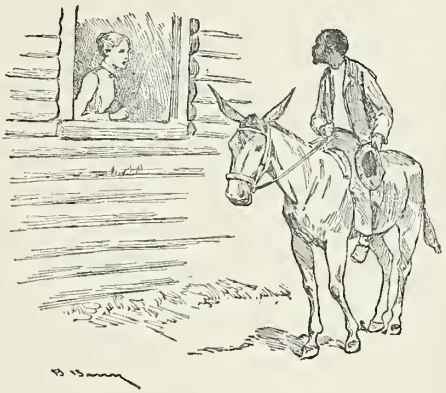
"The blind alligator has been around here!"

Yet, strange to say, nobody had killed him, though to be sure the demand for alligator skin and teeth was not at that time what it is

to-day. Neither were huntsmen so plentiful on the Florida waters.

One afternoon word came from the Point that Uncle James was ill, and the Mate at once set out about making preparations to go over to see her brother.

When all was ready, she sent William to tell the Captain that he was wanted to drive with her over to the Point.



The Captain brought the information that the horses were at the "far grove," the mules gone to Okahumpka, and even Bijou had been ridden by one of the colored boys on the place to the sawmill on the Ocklawaha River, to inquire about some delayed lumber.

"Let's walk over," said the Mate; "it is not far."

"But sand-spurs," replied the Captain. "You would never get there for the sand-spurs."

"Well, then, let us row over; there are the boats," said the Mate, nothing daunted by obstacles.

"The boys have gone over to Long Island in the boats, to hunt Indian relics with Mr. Joiner."

The Mate tapped her forehead with her forefinger, a gesture which meant that her thinking-cap was on.

"Where is the section boat?" she asked, when the *cap* had set a moment.

"Why, Sue," said the Captain, "you don't mean to say you will risk yourself on the lake in that crazy old section boat?"

"It seems to be all that is left," laughed the Mate, "so if you will row me, I will risk it."

"Well," said the Captain, "I can pull as long as she holds together, but she is a risky, rickety concern. A big fish could almost upset her; and so if she lands us both on the bottom of the lake, don't say *I* did it."

"I'll not," replied the Mate. "If we upset and get ourselves 'drowndead,' as Mr. Joiner puts it, I'll promise not to say one word about it."

A few minutes later they left the landing in the section boat, a light little skiff made in two

sections for convenience, when it was necessary to carry a skiff in the wagon to any distant point on the water where a boat would be needed.

These sections were held together when in use by means of iron rods, which passed through the parts, holding them securely in place. Only two people, "scant two" the Mate said, could occupy it at the same time; and then, as she further declared, "it rocked like a cradle on the treetop."

Fortunately, however, the lake was still; the afternoon was a typical Florida afternoon, — balmy, quiet, dreamful, with the scent of orange blossoms in the air.

The Captain's little craft hugged the shore closely, for the Mate insisted on it, saying: "If we have got to drown, do let it be near home, not so 'far away on the deep.' Dear! how the little old shell does rock! Reminds me of a sermon I once heard, by an old negro who lived on an Alabama plantation. He had for his text Noah's Ark, and he closed his sermon by saying: 'I tell you, brudderin, dis ole worl' am a ark, lack ole Noey's wuz. An' it rock lack his'n, — hit's a-rockin' fur de Kingdom, fur de Kingdom; get on de boad, all

you what wants ter be saved, fur I tell you de old ark do rock.' Look out, Captain, you had best pull to the right; there's an obstruction ahead."

"A what?" said the Captain, with a glance over his shoulder.

"Oh, nothing more than a big brown log washed up by the wa — Oh, look! look!"

The Mate pointed to the shore, as she cried out to the Captain to look.

"It's alligators! Alligators! Loads of them! The woods are full of them! Oh, do look!"

The rower rested his oars while he obeyed the command to look. Upon a strip of low land, where the shore ran down on a level with the water, on the hot, white kaolin, in the afternoon sunshine, lay a great brown alligator, basking in the good warmth.

Around him had congregated, of all ages and sizes, to the very smallest, at least forty or fifty others, likewise enjoying the sun.

"My!" said the Captain, "they are having a regular picnic out there, all to themselves. Now if the boys could just get at that lay-out —"

"Unless you care to get 'laid out' yourself, you had best steer for the open sea," said the

Mate. "I remember that 'a big fish can upset the section boat.'"

"Pshaw!" said the Captain. "See them scamper at the first intimation of our presence."

He dipped the oar in the water, and, sure enough, there was a hasty retreat among the alligators. One by one they dropped back into the water until the very last had disappeared; *except* the big brown fellow that had first attracted their attraction. He remained upon the bank, his ugly hide glistening in the sun, his great jaws thrust forward until they were half hidden in the coarse swamp grass growing along the lake shore where the land is flat, between the two great bluffs.

The Mate looked at the brown monster suspiciously:

"What does *that* mean, my Captain?" said she.

"It *looks* as if it means the old fellow is dead; and that his friends and acquaintances of the lake have come to the funeral," replied the Captain. "Suppose we call by and take an inventory?"

"Very well," said the Mate. "I never heard of alligators being possessed of any very great shrewdness, such as foxes and opossums are

accredited with, so I suppose the old fellow is truly dead. Pull carefully, Captain, not such heavy strokes; evenly, evenly; remember we are in the section boat, and that 'a big fish — ' Oh!"

The Mate uttered a cry of surprised pleasure when the boat had drawn nearer the brown carcass lying on the bank.

"Why, Captain," said she, "it is the old blind alligator! the old pig thief! the old cattle maimer! the old — old — "

"Gently, wife," laughed the Captain; "he is dead. His faults — "

"And good riddance," declared the Mate. "Peace to his leavings, I say, and I truly hope there will now be peace among the stock, now that his highness is dead. Row a little nearer, Captain; I wish a last, long, *comprehensive* view of our old terror, so that I may carry an unabridged report to Bijou of the *demise* of his old enemy."

The Captain pulled the boat around close to the shore, and stopped. They were so close to the alligator they could have touched him with their hands easily, the great, slimy beast that had been the terror of the neighborhood for years.

THE OLD BLIND ALLIGATOR.

"Sue," said the Captain, "I wish we could manage to tow him home for the boys. What a fuss they would make over that head! Joe buried one last week, for the skull, that was not nearly so fine as this, yet we thought it a fine one."

"And the ivories, too," said the Mate. "My vinaigrette! I don't doubt there is a splendid one in that great head."

"I am certain of it," said the Captain. "Can't we manage to take him home somehow?"

"Well," replied the Mate, "I can't row, but if you will fasten a line of some kind to the old terror, I will try to *tow* him back to our landing."

"But a line," said the Captain; "I haven't a line. Let's see, let's see! I *must* get him home. The boys must have that head, and you your vinaigrette. But how? Put on your thinking-cap, mother."

"Well," said the Mate, "I owe him many and many a grudge. There are wrongs to be avenged in the name of pigs, calves, and what not. Here is my scarf, — take that. It isn't a new one, but it is a strong one, and long enough to put a little distance between mine

enemy and me. We will give our young gentlemen a start. Now if we had only *killed* him, instead of picking up his corpse in this way, like the remains of an old wreck the sea has beaten and broken and left stranded on the shore, we might do some very genteel crowing. Ugh! the ugly thing! Give me the oar and I will hold the boat steady while you make the line fast to his head. Ugh! you old blind beauty, — there's *one* for Bijou — " She gave a vigorous punch, then one shriek, and the oar fell into the bottom of the boat with a great clatter.

For no sooner did she thrust it into the alligator's brown side, giving that "*one*" vigorous, vengeful prod, than the creature gave a fierce snort, a kind of bull-like bellow, a flop of its great tail, that sent the old section boat spinning out into the lake, and the Captain upon his knees, while he himself dropped back into the water.

Not quietly, however; the prod upon his ribs had evidently put him into a great fury. He lashed the water with his tail until the white foam and bubbles rose all around the little boat, that was reeling and rocking helplessly before his fury.

The Captain had seized the oar, but hesitated to use it, lest it incite the enemy to a still fiercer attack. One blow of his tail would splinter the light vessel, the Captain knew, or certainly upset it. There was nothing to do but wait, and let the boat drift until out of danger.

The Mate said never a word, after that one wild shriek, until the excitement was over. She sat quietly in her end of the boat, pale as death, but with a settled determination not to make a very bad situation worse by losing her self-possession.

But when the bellowing at last ceased, and the water became quiet again, the Captain

dipped in the oar and said, a twinkle in his gray eye:

"Was the view 'comprehensive,' Sue?" Then it was the Mate aroused, and proceeded, in a most vigorous fashion, to resent the recent attack.

"Just like him," she declared. "Just like the ugly varmint to be playing 'possum on the bank, pretending to be asleep until we are almost in his very jaws! Oh, dear! just to think how near you were to putting your hands in his mouth! And how near we both were to going to the bottom of the lake. And how very near we were to a fine skull, and a handsome vinaigrette. Playing 'possum, the sly old beast!"

"I think," said the Captain, "the creature is deaf, and, therefore, had no intimation of our approach until you punched him in the ribs. At any rate, we will be more careful how we capture dead alligators after this. They might resent the familiarity."

"Reminds me of an old negro who used to live on our plantation when I was a girl," said the Mate. "He moved to Kansas, along with a score or more of darkies, who had obtained freedom. In a few months the old fellow came

back and asked for work. He did not like Kansas, evidently, although all he ever said, when questioned, was that 'yer nebber knows what's what tell yer tries hit.' So say I. Captain, is that a boat coming across the lake from Long Island?"

"Two of them," said the Captain. "It is the boys; they are coming home already. Something must be the matter. See! they are signalling us! Shall we go to them?"

"It isn't a signal of distress," said the Mate. "I think we had best not risk the section boat so far from home. Let us wait until they are nearer."

In a little while the rowboats, under the vig-

orous strokes of the boys' paddles, were in hailing distance. The Crackers were evidently greatly excited, for Joe's hat was gone, James's hands were blistered, while Jack's eyes had a wild, frightened eagerness about them, entirely in keeping with the voice in which he shouted:

"Oh, mother, *what* is it? What has happened? We heard you scream 'way over on the island, and came at once. *Is* anybody hurt, or dead, *do* tell us quick?"

And then, for the first time, the Mate realized how she must indeed have screamed, to be heard over on Long Island. Though never for one moment did she or the Captain fail to realize the extent of the danger to which they had been exposed.

Nor did the Captain forget to impress upon the boys the fact that they had acted well and wisely in hurrying at once to their mother's aid, although, as it proved in this case, they could do nothing.

"Another time it might be different," he told them. "At any rate, never take any chances on a suspected danger. It is better to be deceived *many* times, than to disregard *one* real cry for help. This applies to all classes and conditions of life. Remember it."

CHAPTER VI.

WHO STOLE THE BEAR-TRAP?

ANOTHER year marked the continued prosperity of the family at Col Alto. The wharf had been built, just below the bluff upon which, *sometime*, the new house was to stand. There were steps, and a long bridge leading down to it, and the steamer called by *twice* each week.

The banana stalks were full of fruit, and there were lemons, limes, and sweet oranges in the grove. The Mate had learned to utilize many things that were unknown to her two years before. She had learned that the sour wild oranges made a delicately delicious wine, most agreeable to the sick.

And after Mr. Joiner had persuaded her to "bile a few" palmetto cabbages, and the family had declared it a most delicious dish, she had tried it for pickle and found it equally good; although she did not encourage the use of

the palmetto cabbages, since, in order to obtain it, it was necessary to kill the tree, the cabbage consisting of the tender white, nut-like meat, or head, formed in the top of the palmetto-tree. The natives were fond of it, and so, too, were the bears; and so, too, were our Crackers, although it was necessary to fell the tree to get the cabbage; and, according to the Mate, "the palmettoes were too handsome to be eaten."

The Captain, under her directions, had had a grove of the pretty oriental-looking trees replanted, just to the right of the spot upon which, *some* day, the new house was to stand. The new house seemed to be getting nearer and nearer all the while, too; for the Captain had found it necessary to send back to Alabama for fifty extra "*hands*" to help in the groves, and that meant prosperity.

And in the meantime what of the three little Crackers? Growing in the knowledge of fishing, hunting, and trapping; but how about that other knowledge that hides itself between the covers of books, and must be dug for with a little instrument that is tucked away among tissues and cells, called the brain?

The Mate had not forgotten, although she had kept rather quiet about the matter.

One morning, however, she broached the subject to the Captain.

"They are getting to be such strong, healthy boys now," she argued, "they might go to their books with all safety."

"Give them one more year, mother," said the Captain; "they are young yet, and this half wild life is, as you say, making sturdy lads of them. Give them one more year of freedom, and of sunshine, then we will have a tutor for them. Let them study nature with their friend Joiner one year yet."

"If nature was all they learn of 'J'iner,' I would agree very willingly," laughed the Mate. "But they are becoming such veritable little Crackers! Why, only yesterday Joe went down to get his boat, and found it missing. 'Jake J'iner!' I heard him tell James, in Mr. Bus Joiner's own tone and manner; 'Jake J'iner! I was so mad to find my boat gone that I was fit to fight.' And James comforted him by admitting that it was indeed the most outdaciousest piece of impudence he ever heard tell on."

"Well," said the Captain, "a little dialect more or less can't do any serious harm. A good tutor will soon regulate all that. Give them another year with Joiner."

The little Crackers also begged so hard for "Just one more year, mother." "We can't ever be boys again, you know." "And we can be men any time, always." "Do, mother, dear; *don't* bring a tutor to Col Alto." Then Jack settled the matter by reminding the Mate there wasn't any place for him anyhow until they got the new house, and the yacht that was to be bought at the same time the house was ready.

"I am not thinking of housing a tutor in a steam yacht," said the Mate. "And as for Col Alto, there are seven rooms. Surely, I can stow him away somewhere, *little* Cracker."

"But, mother," said Jack, "there is your room, and there is the sitting-room, and there is the parlor, and the dining-room, our room, and the two company rooms —"

"And what are they for?" asked the Mate, with a smile that said, "Now, sir, you are cornered."

"They are for company," replied the Cracker. "They are for the Governor of Alabama when he comes here to go hunting with father."

So the matter was dropped for the moment, although the Mate had fully settled it in her own mind that this must be the last year of

freedom — "ignorance," she called it — allowed the three little Dixie Crackers.

It was about this time that the bears and wildcats, with which the hammocks abounded, began to be a great nuisance.

The young pigs that disappeared, the chickens, and turkeys, caused much annoyance to the Captain's wife. But when the tender young bananas began to disappear as fast as they ripened, the Captain himself awoke to the necessity of taking steps to catch the depredators.

One morning he came down to the pond where the Mate was helping the Crackers catch minnows, with which to bait their hooks for trout.

He wore a very long face, and the Mate, who often declared she had not lived opposite that face all these years (about sixteen) for nothing, immediately looked into it, and inquired:

"What is wrong, Captain?"

"Something is ruining my bananas," replied the Captain. "Evidently it is some wild animal, for there are tracks about the grove that *I* think were made by a wildcat. Mr. Joiner, however, insists they are 'b'ar tracks.' Any-

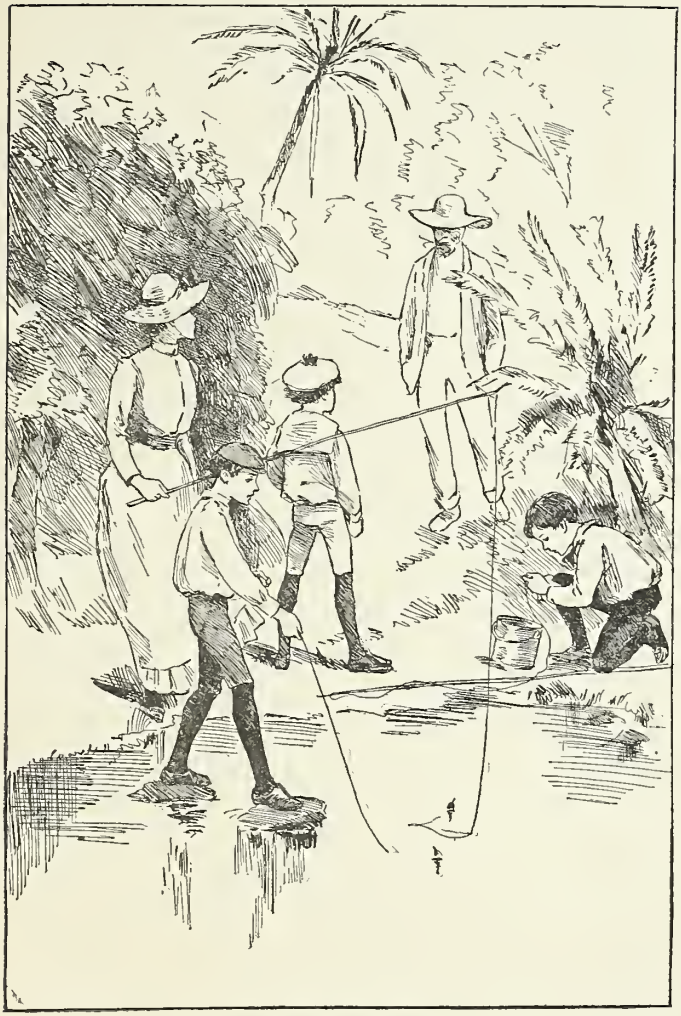
how, they are the tracks made by a thief, and I have sent over to Drake Point to borrow a trap until the wagon goes to Okahumpka, when I shall order one of my own. Lest the trap should not work well, I mean to set a watch on the bananas to-night, and have the animal shot, if possible."

At this piece of information there was a great clamor among the Crackers.

"Oh, good!" "Oh, let me!" "Let us!" "We'll watch!" "We'll kill the bear that eats the bananas!" "May we, father?" "Will you let us?" "Oh, say, do, that we may watch!"

"Easy," said the Captain. "One at a time. You wish to guard the banana grove *all night?* Remember, it is an all-night job. No sneaking home at the first mew of a wildcat, or sound of a bear in the palmetto-tree."

It was so easy to be brave there in the good daylight, while the sun shone on the pond, and the hands were singing in their drowsy, dreamy treble over in the grove, among the lemons. And father and mother stood there, wide-awake, ready to step between them and danger, if danger *could* exist in a world so



MINNOWS FOR BAIT.

tranquilly beautiful and good, and so *seemingly* safe.

"Now, boys," it was the Mate who lifted a warning voice, "your father really wishes a *watch*, not a make-believe, for his bananas. Before you rush into it, consider, — for once you undertake it, you must carry it through."

"Indeed we will, mother," said James. "We should so like to be of some use to father."

"There are other ways that involve less danger," replied the Mate. "The question is, will you *stick?* Remember, before you promise, *remember the Indian raid.*"

"Oh, father, we are not afraid," said Joe. "We can take our guns and hide over in the garden, our own garden, that we are familiar with. It is not like prowling about in a strange hammock all night."

"And we will just let daylight into that bear; see if we don't," added Jack. "Won't we, James?"

"We'll make him bite the dust," said James, "like Mr. Joiner makes those *he* kills, 'worser'n pizen.'"

"May we, father? You know we can't ever be brave unless you give us a chance. May we?" said the *big* Cracker, as he brushed the

dirt from his knees, where they had come in contact with the soft, sandy soil, while he "dipped" for minnows.

"Well," replied the Captain, "we will see; we will see."

The Crackers knew what that meant, and already they began to chatter with the Mate about the wonderful exploit they were about to have, and about the *hide* of the bear, which was to be preserved in a rug, for the Mate's own use.

They had not observed the wink that passed between the Captain and his wife, nor had the faintest hint of treason entered their minds, when the Captain hurried away to speak to Mr. Joiner, who was assisting that day in rooting up dwarf palmettoes in a piece of new ground they were clearing for lemons, just beyond the orange lands.

It was finally agreed that they should indeed act as a watch upon the grove, and destroy, if possible, the *bear* that was robbing them of their first bananas. Great preparations were made by the three Crackers,—guns were cleaned and loaded, an ambush was built just on the edge of the garden, near which the bear must pass, in getting from the

hammock to the banana grove, and at nine o'clock the Crackers, with their weapons in first-class order, "went upon duty."

The Mate had allowed them an extra sip of coffee, since there was a look in the *little* Cracker's eye that wasn't just the expression for a sentry on duty to wear. She protested, however, against the plan to carry a lunch with them to the garden, — for brave as the Mate was, and brave as she devoutly desired the little Crackers to be, she was a woman, — and she *had* an idea that food would draw wild animals, whose sense of smell is most acute. She had no desire to draw them to the covert of the Crackers, so, without giving any reason for it, she forbade the lunch.

The moon was shining when the boys crept under their ambush, and set their guns in position, with the muzzles pointed towards the bananas, whose long stalks rose white and ghost-like in the moonlight, with their long leaves flapping, when the wind stirred them, like the arms of some gaunt giant. A more delighted trio of boys were never given a duty, or one more brave of heart, and ready to attack an enemy.

This courage may have been due in part to

the moonlight, — possibly, in a *very slight* degree, to the light that twinkled from the sitting-room window at Col Alto. For they never could have suspected that upon the hill, just beyond them, their good friend Mr. Joiner was also on duty, — said duty being to see that no harm came to the three little Crackers.

The Captain had instructed them in their duty. There must be no talking or whispering. They must lie perfectly still, and keep their eyes upon the strip of cleared ground lying between the hammock and the grove. Nobody must fire until *Joe* should give the word. Joe was a good shot for his years and

experience. Moreover, the Captain wished the other two Crackers to feel that their older brother was to some extent their leader and adviser. He especially desired that the *big* Cracker should feel that a responsibility concerning his brothers rested upon him, and neither the Captain nor the Mate ever lost an opportunity for forcing this idea upon his mind.

The trap had been set slightly back into the grove, where the stalks were thickest and the fruit ripest. It was one of those clumsy iron concerns, that take their captive by the foot, and hold it in a grip of torture until released. It was fastened by an iron chain to a small oak that grew just on the edge of the grove, and directly in the course of the tracks previously discovered.

It was a royal undertaking at nine o'clock. At ten, however, the moon forsook them, and much of the glory of the adventure went out with it.

If they could only have spoken to each other it would have been *some* comfort, but orders were positive, and the Crackers were obedient.

They entered upon a kind of foot tele-

graphy, however, which for awhile served them very well. A slight punch with the toe upon the calf meant, "See anything?" A rub of the sole upon the calf, in reply, meant "Nothing."

A touch of the heel upon the calf meant, "I hear a noise." A kick meant, "Get your gun ready." And a chuck in the ribs with the hand meant, "Wake up."

It was a very still night, scarcely a sound for a long time. Then the boys' keen ears *did* hear something. It was not a groan, nor a snort exactly, — Joe thought it was an alligator's bellow at first, while James was pretty sure it was a bear. Jack thought it sounded "more like somebody snoring than anything else."

The strange part about it was that it continued all night without interruption; so the boys said.

Once Jack dealt Joe a vigorous kick, which brought him to his knees and to his gun with such abrupt promptness that James had a half suspicion he was nodding.

But, although he obeyed the signal, and "got his gun ready," nothing more fierce than that mysterious noise from the region of the

hill near by offered itself to their marksmanship at the moment.

It was somewhat later that a stealthy figure crept with noiseless step, bristles extended, and yellow eyes glaring, from the gloomy depths of the hammock, and went, like a spirit of evil, straight towards the ambush behind which lay the brave watchers.

Steady, steady now, little Crackers; to-morrow will have a tale to tell, no doubt of that.

It was daylight when the Captain awoke and hurried into his clothes. The Mate turned drowsily, for another nap.

"Anything from the boys?" she inquired, sleepily.

"Not a word," said the Captain. "Must be something wrong, or they would have reported before this. I am going to look after them."

"Then wait for me," said the Mate, and hastily putting on her slippers and dressing-gown, she was ready in a moment to set out with the Captain on a tour of inspection and of investigation.

The grass was heavy with the dew, and at every step the sand-spurs pricked at her stockingless feet. But the Mate was a pioneer's

wife, or told herself she was, and a mother; and into the mother's heart had crept a vague fear, unexpressed but felt, for the dear little three who had begged "to be of use to father."

They went by the banana grove, and saw fresh tracks. There were signs of a scramble of some description, and marks of something heavy having been dragged across the clearing, towards the hammock. The trap was gone; only a bit of the broken chain swung from the tree to which it had been locked.

They hurried on to the ambush, stopped a moment, and then passed on to the hill where Mr. Joiner had been put to watch.

And *then* the Mate sat down on the ground, sand-spurs and all, and laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks. The robber had run off with the trap; in the ambush lay the three little Crackers, *fast asleep*, — on the hill, stretched full length, lay Mr. Joiner, still snoring away with that vigor that had caused the three Crackers to think an alligator was on the war-path.

The Mate sent the Captain to the house for the breakfast-bell; and ten minutes later its deafening tones were sounding in the ears of the sleepers, whose feelings, on being thus

awakened, can be better imagined than described.

But the worst was yet to come. During the day, so rapidly does ill news travel, Uncle James sent over to inquire if the boys could be engaged to watch his poultry yard all night; saying that there was a *rat* that had found an entrance in some way and was stealing the chickens' food.

And later came the inevitable letter from Aunt Lizzie, enclosing the story of the "Seven Sleepers," also a newspaper slip containing an account of a sentinel who went to sleep at his post and was shot.

But the worst of all was when they were scolding the Joiner boys, whom they had caught in the act of removing their boat, and Jake put his fingers in his eyes and began to rub them, as if just awakening out of sleep, and sang out in his flat, Cracker voice, "Is that air the breakfus-bell a-ringin', did yer say?"

While Luke inquired, knowingly:

"Any b'ars over ter you-unses bananny grove, this year?"

At this the little Crackers said never a word.

CHAPTER VII.

HUNTING ALLIGATOR EGGS.

One morning the Captain drove over to Okahumpka, and, the day being especially pleasant, the Mate decided at the last moment to go with him.

There was no time to "give orders," even if the Crackers had not been down in the "far grove,"— the new grove that lay beyond the land cleared the first year of the Captain's residence in Florida. So word was left with William, for the boys to "behave themselves, be good boys, and not go out of sight of the house without either William or Mr. Joiner."

"That *out of sight of the house* clause includes everything, I *believe*," laughed the Mate, as she climbed to a seat in the "no-top" buggy which was to convey the two to the nearest village, Okahumpka, now a railroad station.

They had been gone about an hour when

the Crackers came home, received their orders, and at once set about finding some means of amusing themselves.

Another hour passed in this rather forlorn manner; then Jack, the *little* Cracker, whose fertile brain was ever on the inventive quest, startled his brothers by proposing a row over to the Little Island in search of alligator eggs.

Instead of promptly putting aside the temptation, they *discussed* it.

"There are lots of them over there," said Joe. "I heard Mr. Joiner tell mother the 'Islint ware in an' about et up with 'gator eggs.'"

"Mother wants some, too; I heard her say so," said Jack. "She wants to blow the meat out and send the empty shells to Aunt Lizzie. She'll be glad to get them, I 'most know."

"Pioneers ought to know all about alligator eggs, anyhow," added Joe, "and you know we are pioneers, and it is our business to explore. Let's go. What do you say, James?"

"I don't quite think we ought," said James, the only one to offer even a faint protest. "Mother said we were not to go 'out of sight of the house.'"

"Well, Little Island isn't out of sight of the

house," said Jack. And that seemed to settle it; for without further parley they ran down to the lake, to find one of the rowboats missing.

"Jake Joiner!" snapped Joe, as he pointed to the spot where the boat was always left when not in use. "I'd just like to have it upset 'em into the lake sometime, and maybe they'd let it alone," said Joe. "I just would."

"You wouldn't like mother to hear you say so, I'll be bound," said the *little* Cracker, as he pushed the remaining boat off the sand and stepped in.

"We can all go in here, anyhow," he continued. "We don't need two boats, 'thout it's to haul the 'gator eggs home in. Come on; pile in, — if the wind rises before we start, that settles it."

"And if it rises before we get back, *that* settles it," said James, still hesitating. At which Cracker Joe, already in, and with the oars in his hands, lost patience, and called out, angrily:

"See here, if you're afraid, do you stay there. Jack and I can manage without you; *we are pioneers*, we are."

At which the *middle* Cracker very reluc-

tantly climbed into the boat, and Joe "pulled her out to sea."

They had forgotten to carry a basket for the eggs. They had forgotten, also, until well out in the lake, how the Mate had repeatedly remarked upon the danger of robbing an alligator's nest. It was the *little* Cracker who recalled the remark to the other two, — the same *little* Cracker who had suggested, and argued for the adventure.

"Well," said the *big* Cracker, "I have heard her say many a time that she intended *some* time to take the boat and go over to the Little Island after alligator eggs."

"We'll surprise her with an odd hundred or so," said James, who, according to his habit, — or disposition, — once into the scrape, dropped the "oughtn'ts" and "shouldn'ts" and "might-have-beens" into the sea of Too Late, and set about finding the very best there was to be found in the enterprise. "We'll surprise her with the eggs, and then she won't scold us, maybe."

"If a big she-alligator swallows us whole, we can't fetch her nothing," said the *little* Cracker, with something very like a quiver in his voice.

The *big* Cracker assumed his very grandest air of superiority, and said:

"See here, if you are afraid, you had better go back. S'posin' I turn round and '*fetch*' you to the bank and let you go home."

"S'posin' you fetch your own self there," retorted the *little* Cracker. "I reckint I'll hold out about as long as you do, and I *reckint* I'll bring back about as many 'gator eggs."

"Reckint so?" said Joe. And at that moment James called to them to leave off quarrelling and look where they were going.

"Can't you see there's a wind rising, Joe?" he demanded, "and that it is driving the boat too far out? Pull on your oar there, and let Jack be. A fine rower you are!"

In spite of the taunt, however, Joe was a good oarsman. He had merely forgotten, in disputing with Jack, to notice the course they were taking, until, as James said, the wind, which was rising all the while, threatened to sweep the little craft out into the open lake, where, unprotected by the bluffs, there would be serious danger of upsetting among the big waves.

By a strong sweep of the oar, another, and a dozen more, Joe sent the boat spinning into the right track.

But somehow that little prelude to the

adventure had cast a damper over the whole exploit.

"Hadn't we really better turn back?" said James. "There is time to get home yet, but if the wind rises very much it will cut us off out here on the island."

"We can raise a distress signal," said Joe, forgetting there was nobody to see it, "and besides, we needn't stay long. We can just grab the eggs and run back to the boat."

"Yes," said the *little* Cracker, "we can, — if they are growing on the trees."

"Well, anyhow, we are too near them to give up now," declared Joe. "Here's the island, and here we are. Why, here's a landing, too, — somebody been here before. Out with you, James, and catch the chain."

"We really must not stay long," said James. "Look at the lake." And truly, the pretty lake of sunbeams was a great expanse of boiling, frothy waves, that hissed and sputtered angrily against the Little Island.

The little island was a small spot of land, hammock, covered with a wild, tangled growth, which all natives round about knew to be a covert for rattlesnakes, cats, and the alligators that went there to sun themselves and to de-

posit their eggs. The entire island did not consist of more than two or three acres.

The boys made the boat fast, and started briskly upon their explorations. "Why, here is a little path," exclaimed the *big* Cracker, "already trom-tramped out! Whoever could have tromped-tramped it? And wherever does it lead?"

"Don't know, but much obliged to the 'trom, trom' tramper all the same," said the *little* Cracker; who never forgot, under circumstances however exciting, to enjoy the *big* Cracker's plunges into the Joiner dialect.

It would have required but a short while to explore the entire island had it not been for the heavy, almost impenetrable growth that, at times, even covered the "little path" they had so rejoiced to find. It was a curious kind of a path; sometimes the growth covered it in a perfect tangle, to within a foot of the ground. Yet, there was no break, no turning aside of the smooth, plainly marked trail.

"Looks curious," said Jack, trying to part the long, gray moss that swung from the oaks above to tangle itself in the growth below. "I'll wager there are snakes enough in here if there are no 'gator eggs; that's what I'll do."

ON THE LAKE.

"Hush!" said Joe. "You ought to know better than to talk about such things out here. If you are afraid — oh! I heard something in the palmettoes over there."

It was Jack's turn to scoff.

"Scared? *Who* is scared, I'd like to know?" said he. "And when is the time to talk about snakes, if it isn't when you're out in the woods? Wait till you're in bed at night, I reckon. Oh! Hush! I heard something, too; right over there in that jungle. Let's turn back. Mother wouldn't like this, I'm afraid." And the *little* Cracker showed a desire to retreat, and that too without "standing upon the order of his going."

"Ought to have thought of that at first," said James. "Too late now, and hush! I *thought* I heard a snort."

They stopped in the path to listen, — there was only the sough of the wind, in the palm-trees, the swaying of the gray moss, the occasional dropping of a wild orange in the tall, rank grasses, and the splashing of the water against the island.

"I reckon it wasn't anything worse than our consciences," said James. "Go, on, Joe; push through, and let's get the eggs. There'll be

trouble getting back, I'm afraid, if we don't hurry." And at this point of the adventure James took the lead. The others fell back, ready to follow, but not ready to admit that each was just a little afraid of their grand exploit.

But, at every step their courage was going; the slightest break in the underbrush caused them to start. Finally, a rabbit ran across the trail, and Jack gave a quick, startled cry.

"Come back!" said Joe. "That's a bad sign; the worst sign in the world. I heard William say it was 'shore death' for a rabbit to run across your path. Besides, the wind is rising more and more. We'll *never* get home unless we start now."

"No; come on," said James. "We must get the eggs now. Look! What is that? A pig-

pen, all covered over with sticks. How did it ever get here? And what *is* that in it? Oh! if it isn't — wait, let's see!"

He climbed over the body of a fallen tree, and, pushing through a clump of dwarf palmettoes, stopped before a kind of enclosure very closely resembling that which he had supposed it to be, — a pig's pen.

The others leaned over the fallen tree to watch, with eager interest, while James investigated the queer structure and its meaning.

It was neither square nor round, merely a collection of sticks, moss, and dry leaves, heaped into a kind of wall, across which was laid a great heap of dry brush, so concealing the interior of the pen that the boys did not observe, at first glance, the rich, creamy looking eggs, larger than a hen's eggs, smaller than those of a goose, with which it was literally filled.

James stood a moment over the pen, peering into the brush, wondering what on earth it could mean. Suddenly he straightened himself, turned to the boys, and shouted:

"It's the alligator's nest! It's the alligator's nest! And it's *full of eggs!* Come on!"

All fear was instantly forgotten; all danger,

everything, except their delight in the newly found treasure. They scrambled over the fallen tree, and through the stinging growth, laughing, shouting, totally unconscious of danger.

The alligator had laid her eggs on the ground, depositing them in the warm sunlight, and then covering and surrounding them with brush and leaves, leaving them to hatch, while she took herself back to the water, as is the habit of these creatures.

The alligator keeps an eye on the eggs, however, and comes ashore for her snooze, near the place where her embryo family has been set to hatch.

The Crackers tore away the brush, and began, with all despatch, to rifle the nest.

"Where shall we put them?" cried the *little* Cracker. "There are so many."

"In our hats," said James; and it was done, and the hats filled at that, so quickly, and there were still so many left, that the question was again raised where to put them. "In our bosoms," said James, "and in our pockets."

And when this was done and a few still remained, Joe cried enough.

"We will have to leave the old lady a nest-

egg, I reckon," said he, "as we are about loaded for all we can carry."

"No," said Jack; "let's not leave a single one. Alligators ain't no good, and ought to be destroyed, anyhow. Let's put these in the boat and come back, and — hello! What's that? Oh, Joe, James! Listen! Oh, *what* is it? Look, look!"

A sound that made their very hearts stand still, a sound half bellow, half roar, like the noise of an angry bull, came to them from the jungle through which they had passed by the little *path* concerning which they had so carelessly speculated only a few minutes before.

They waited an instant, and then they saw the horrid head appear above the yellow grass.

"It's the old she-alligator!" shouted James. "And she is coming right at us."

"O Lord!" cried Jack. "Help us out — this time — oh, what will we do? O Lord, help us!" Nobody jeered this time, — the horrid beast was too near; and coming nearer, coming straight up the little path, her own individual work that path, to her "nest" on the island.

In all their lives they had never seen anything so angry, so terrible. She was tearing up the very earth with lashings from her sharp

tail. In a few seconds she had cleared away the strong, wild growth about her as effectually as though a sharp blade had passed over it. When she beheld the boys she began to beat at a strong sapling with her tail; and before she ceased the tree fell to the ground, actually cut in sunder. Her great mouth, with its hideous fangs, opened and shut, sending forth the most unearthly sounds.

So sudden and so terrible was the attack, the Crackers forgot to stir; but stood watching the mad alligator with a kind of helpless fascination, although they knew, having been often told, that one blow from the creature's terrible tail could sweep them into the great open jaws.

Suddenly she turned, paused an instant, and then James shouted to the boys to "Run."

"Run," he cried, "to the boat! This way!"

And, following his leading, they plunged into the hammock, beating a way through moss and nettle and stinging bamboo, to the water at a point below the path by which they had come, and which the alligator was holding.

It was a terrible undertaking, but they knew it was a choice between this and the alligator's jaws. Life and death hung upon their move-

ments, and the knowledge lent them both strength and courage.

They reached the boat and were pulling at the chain when Jack shouted, as he leaped in:

"She is coming! Quick! Push out! She'll overturn the boat with her tail!"

They required no urging to "push out," and in a moment more Joe was pulling for home, with all the strength of his young arms.

"Let me have an oar, Joe," said James. "I feel strong enough to row straight out to the Gulf of Mexico, while that thing is in sight. Look, oh, look! She is splintering that tree with her tail."

Almost afraid to stir, lest she should put out after them and overturn the boat, the boys glanced back, to see the alligator, still bellowing and snorting, lashing the tree, cutting it as with an axe, by her furious blows.

"Let's get away from here," said Jack. "My! but ain't she a terror?"

When safely away from the island, the Crackers took breath, and made an inventory of the remains of their plunder. The eggs had suffered in the excitement.

"I had thirty when I started," said Joe.

"And I had twenty-three," said Jack.

"And I twenty-seven," said James. "Every one in my bosom is smashed. I'm eggy all over, from chin to toe."

"So am I," said Joe; "but the hat is all right; there's but one broken one in it."

"I didn't put any in *my* bosom," said Jack. "I was afraid they would hatch. Mother says one hatched on the parlor-table once, up at Uncle James's house."

From the remains they counted sixty-one eggs. The exploit had been, in one sense, a success; yet Jack expressed the sentiments of the three when he said:

"I'm awful glad we've got the eggs to show for our trip. And I'm afraid even that will not *quite* satisfy mother."

A "fear" that agitated each little breast of them, and tended to blunt the edge of their triumph no little.

"Well," said James, as the boat touched land, and the treasures were lifted carefully out, "we've got enough eggs, anyhow."

"Yes," said Jack, with a chuckle, "*I* have. I have got alligator eggs to satisfy *me* for a mighty *long* time, *I* tell you."

CHAPTER VIII.

JACKO AND THE EGGS.

The Captain and his wife had not returned when the Crackers reached home. But William, who had missed the boat and suspected the cause of its disappearance, told them they might "just expect to catch it," when they *did* come home.

And indeed a suspicion had come to the culprits that they deserved to "catch it," whatever that mysterious term might mean.

Who shall tell mother? That was the question to be decided before the "no-top" came home.

Joe declared he *would not*, so that settled that, "short metre," James said.

"I tell you," said Jack, "let's let the eggs tell her. Let's put them where she can find them first thing, and then she will be so surprised, she'll forget to be angry with us for going out against orders."

So they decided to put the eggs in the silver punch-bowl that had belonged to their great-great-grandmother, and had probably at one time been used for serving punch. The Mate, however, did not approve of punch, and as the bowl was not useful as a soup tureen, she kept it, in state, on the sideboard in the dining-room, "to be admired," *and* "to collect dust."

The boys set the bowl in the centre of the dining-table, and filled it with the creamy alligator eggs. Pretty eggs they were of such a dainty, delicate appearance one almost could doubt they were laid by the uncouth, slimy alligator.

"Sixty! Five good dozen," said Joe. "That ought to satisfy anybody."

As if ten dozen eggs, or, indeed, any number of eggs, could compensate for an act of wilful disobedience.

"Mother likes pretty things," said Jack, "and odd things, too." And in his heart he wished he could present the "pretty things" to her with an open face and a clean conscience, and with some hope of an approving smile.

"Now," continued the *little* Cracker, "let's go and hide, and see what will happen."

"No, sir," said James, "I won't 'hide.' That looks too much like a sneak. I'll stand at the back door until she sees the eggs, but I won't stand a minute longer."

Despite his good resolve, however, the buggy was so long in coming that James allowed himself to be persuaded down to the fish-pond, where he fell in with the "hands," who were telling great stories of the bears and panthers they had helped to kill in Alabama, and he forgot all about the eggs, until he heard one of the men say the "master had come home."

Immediately he rose, gave a nag at his courage, and set out for the house, briskly, lest the courage should desert him before he

could get there. It certainly did take a decided downward turn, when, half way up the hill, he met the Captain. Anger was plainly to be seen in his eyes, as, stopping a moment, he said, in a firm, emphatic way:

"Go to the house this instant, sir. Where are your brothers?"

The boy gave a timid little nod towards the pond. "Down there, sir," he faltered, and when his father passed on, with those long, quick strides which William had told them always "meant something," James concluded they were indeed going to "catch it," and he set out for the house as fast as his feet could carry him.

To confess; that was his one chance, he thought. And anyhow, he had meant to do so from the first; only he forgot it in listening to the negroes' stories.

His mother was standing in the dining-room door, her hat still unremoved, her gloves on, and in her hands the silver punch-bowl, *empty*.

If the Cracker had been a very great student of faces, he might have discovered that, under all that exceedingly severe air with which the Mate was waiting to receive him, there were unmistakable signs of a laugh, that required

all the Mate's will force to keep under and out of sight.

James only saw the empty bowl and the severe manner, however, and these frightened him almost as much as the old alligator had done, whose nest he had helped to plunder.

"Oh, mother," he began, "I meant to come right in and tell you, and I for—"

"Go in there, sir," said the Mate, stepping outside, and pointing within the dining-room.

Once in, what a spectacle met him!

The room seemed to be literally painted with eggs. The five dozen that had been placed in the punch-bowl to "surprise" the Mate, had surprised her from the walls instead. There was egg on the floor, egg on the windows, egg on the doors and mantel, the sideboard, the walls, the very ceiling itself. The long mirror above the mantel was streaked with egg from top to bottom, while a zigzag, ragged crack crossed, diagonally, the smooth, beautiful glass. The vases on the mantel lay on the floor in a hundred or more tiny pieces; the castor cruets were emptied on the carpet, the salt and pepper had disappeared, there were three broken window-panes, and full, square on the nose of the Governor of Ala-

bama, that hung upon the wall, was a great yellow blotch of alligator egg.

James held his breath before the fearful wreck and ruin.

"Oh, mother, *who* did it? What *does* it mean?" he managed to say, when the full extent of the mischief dawned upon him.

"It began," replied the Mate, "in an act of disobedience on the part of three boys who knew better. The finishing touches were given by Jacko, — a poor little monkey who broke his chain, but who knew *no* better. The monkey received a sound whipping for his part of the mischief. Can you tell what ought to be done with the boys?"

And then the Cracker said the very thing of all things, innocently to be sure, to ensure himself against the punishment Jacko had received.

"Oh, mother, *whip* us!" he sobbed. "Give us all three a good whipping; we need it. And we are so sorry, and we want to be whipped, and — and — and forgiven."

And the Cracker put his arms around the Mate's neck, and cried for very shame.

Half an hour later, three little Crackers in three long aprons (and with three long faces),

each with a rag and a basin of water, were down upon their knees scouring the carpet.

That done, the Mate had them bring a step-ladder and wipe off the walls, where Jacko had spattered the logs with eggs. Then the windows were washed, and the doors. The big mirror they were not required to clean. The Mate declared "one monkey was quite enough when it came to polishing the mirror."

And when all was done, the three little Crackers went off in the grove, and told each other they would have "much preferred a whipping like Jacko got to the *aprons* and *wash-rags*."

After supper they heard the Mate telling the Captain about Jacko's antics. The Mate had no idea they were listening, so she told it in her very funniest style; and the Captain laughed until his long beard fairly shook.

"He was standing in the centre of the table when I opened the door," said the Mate, "the punch-bowl at his right hand, which held an egg. He did not hear me open the door, and for a moment I was too startled to stir.

"A delightful grin was on his face, as he turned the egg in his hand, then hurled it, with

all his strength, against the window-pane. Another and another, as quick as lightning. When I called out, sharply, 'Jacko!' he gave one hurried glance at the door where I stood, dived into the punch-bowl, seized the last remaining egg, and sent it at the Governor's nose, with the precision of an Indian sharp-shooter. The *last* egg — as if determined not to lose one shot! Then he turned to me, began to rub his stomach and cry. When he found I intended to punish him he broke away, seized the coffee-urn, and ran up to the comb of the kitchen roof, where William had to climb and bring him down."

The boys heard the story through, laughing under their breath. However, the adventure had its other side which, as yet, they had not had the courage to disclose, — that is, the attack of the alligator.

The Mate brought about the story of their fright and danger before the evening was over,

very innocently on her part, very effectually on theirs.

"Joe," she said, when the family had gathered in the sitting-room for the evening chat, or reading, "what is that spot on your bosom?"

Joe glanced down at the white waist where the telltale spot seemed, as he looked, to grow larger and larger.

"Egg," said he, dropping his face over the story of Columbus he was reading.

"Egg? Come here," and the Mate opened the waist and found such a spatter of dry egg and powered shell, that she puckered up her face, and exclaimed:

"Why, you look like an unwashed frying-pan! How did this happen? Out with the whole story!"

And "out with" it Joe did, not omitting anything, for the Crackers were truthful if sometimes disobedient.

There were two very sober faces when the boys finished their story. And when they kissed the Mate good night, an hour later, they were wiser (and cleaner) boys, for they had seen a tear on the Mate's cheek. And they knew that she knelt at her prayers a

longer time than usual that night. And when, supposing them to be asleep, she went in to kiss them again, they heard her whisper, "My boys, my own darlings."

They lay very still until she went out; then Joe lifted himself on his elbow, and, leaning out of bed, called to James, who was sleeping with Jack, and said, in a sharp whisper:

"Say, I do hope this will not get to the ears of Jake Joiner."

"Nor to Aunt Lizzie's," James whispered back in reply.

Which "hopes," however, proved to be altogether vain.

CHAPTER IX.

TO THE WITHLACOOCHEE RIVER.

One morning, when the three little Crackers were trying to persuade their mother that it was the season of the year when deer-meat was most to be desired, and "bears ought to be killed, anyhow," and that they were confident Mr. Joiner would go hunting with them but for the asking, the Captain came upon the scene and, unwittingly, settled the matter for them; and that, too, in a matter far more satisfactory than they could have hoped to settle it themselves.

"Sue," said he to the Mate, "Joiner tells me there is phosphate, and gypsum also, on the tract of land on the Withlacoochee River, which I spoke of buying. If it is true I should be sorry to lose the trade, for Florida will need all the fertilizers she can get in the coming years. Gypsum and phosphate will hold their own by and by. I was thinking it might be

pleasant to take the wagon, and provisions enough for a week's outing, and all go over for a kind of business-pleasure trip. The boys would enjoy it; there is splendid hunting,— deer, bear, *and panthers* —"

"Panthers!" The Crackers had maintained a respectful silence until the magic word, "*panthers*," was spoken. Deer, bear, and even wildcats had become almost a monotony. But *panthers* —

"Oh, father, let us! Do let us!" A triple shout went up when the Captain replied:

"I see no reason why you should not if your mother agrees."

"But the camping?" said the Mate. "We have no tent, and, as Mr. Joiner says, 'no nothink' for camping. And where is the Withlacoochee, anyhow, and how far away are the phosphate fields, my Captain, before I give my consent?"

"The Withlacoochee is a river," said the Captain.

"A stream of water flowing through the land," the Mate interrupted. "Go on."

"It is some fifty miles to the phosphate fields; it will require two days in which to make the trip. Joiner is going along as pilot.

There is a deserted cabin on the place in which he says we can 'take up,' although there is no 'chimbly,' and we will be compelled to do our cooking outside, camp fashion. There will be plenty of fish and wild meat, and we will carry a supply of coffee, corn meal, and tin cups."

"It does sound tempting," declared the Mate. "Only, when the hunters are off on the chase, suppose a panther should run off with the cook?"

"I have provided company for 'the cook,'" said the Captain. "If you consent to go, Joiner will take his team over, and in that case Mrs. Joiner and her boys will go along."

"Mrs. Joiner will be an addition," said the Mate, "but I am not so sure about the boys. They always seem to succeed in ruffling the feathers of *my* three little Crackers, who do not seem disposed to bear with them, or to recollect that the Joiners have had scant opportunity for polishing those points of honor commonly known as truth, honesty, and cleanliness."

The Mate seemed very doubtful indeed, the Crackers thought, as to the expediency of such a combination of companions. But the

boys did such vigorous insisting, and made such large promises, that consent was finally obtained.

They were to start early the following morning, so they began preparations at once. A sack of coffee was parched and ground, a sack of meal prepared, and another of brown sugar (the Mate declared hunters never expected white sugar, and that reconciled the Crackers to the muddy "Fluridy brown"). A number of tin pans, tin cups, a large boiler, and a water-pail. Then there was a "skillet" for frying fish, a hoe for breaking corn bread, some knives and forks, bedding, straw to sleep on, corn for the horses, and then came the question of packing.

Mr. Joiner agreed to "fotch the horse-feed" in his wagon, "if the Cap'n could load the rest." The "Cap'n" thought he could, and so the division of plunder was affected.

The Crackers were jubilantly impatient; they polished their guns, packed a lot of fishing-tackle, and *still* the day was not more than half over.

"S'posin' we help mother," said James. "That will make the time go. Besides, I heard her say there was so much to be done

she didn't see how she *could* get ready in a day."

So they ran off to offer their services to the Mate, who soon found, indeed, that three pairs of nimble hands and willing feet helped wonderfully towards lessening her own steps, and hastening matters for an early start.

For instance, she had only to say, "Bring me the cups, Jack," or "Now the salt, Joe," as she knelt before the big box that was to carry their provisions, and afterwards serve as eating-table to the camp. But for the Crackers she would have had to go to the pantry for the things herself; for no Florida housekeeper ever calls *a hand* from the field to do the work about the house. And the cook was busy preparing the regular family dinner, in addition to a lunch for the travellers next day. For the Captain said they would only stop at noon long enough to eat a cold lunch and feed the horses. This was necessary if they expected to reach a point on the road where there was a spring, beside which they were to camp for the night.

It was ten o'clock at night before the final arrangements were made, the last orders given.

"Air the house every day, William; feed

Polly, keep an eye on Jacko; don't let Bijou go in the lake."

To all of which William had replied, again and again: "Yessum; yessum; yessum."

There were three very tired little Crackers to creep into bed that night, and still sleep refused to come; more than once the Mate had called out from the sitting-room:

"Boys, remember you must rise early to-morrow, — leave off talking, now, and go to sleep."

And she supposed they had obeyed long ago, when suddenly Jack's voice called out, sharply:

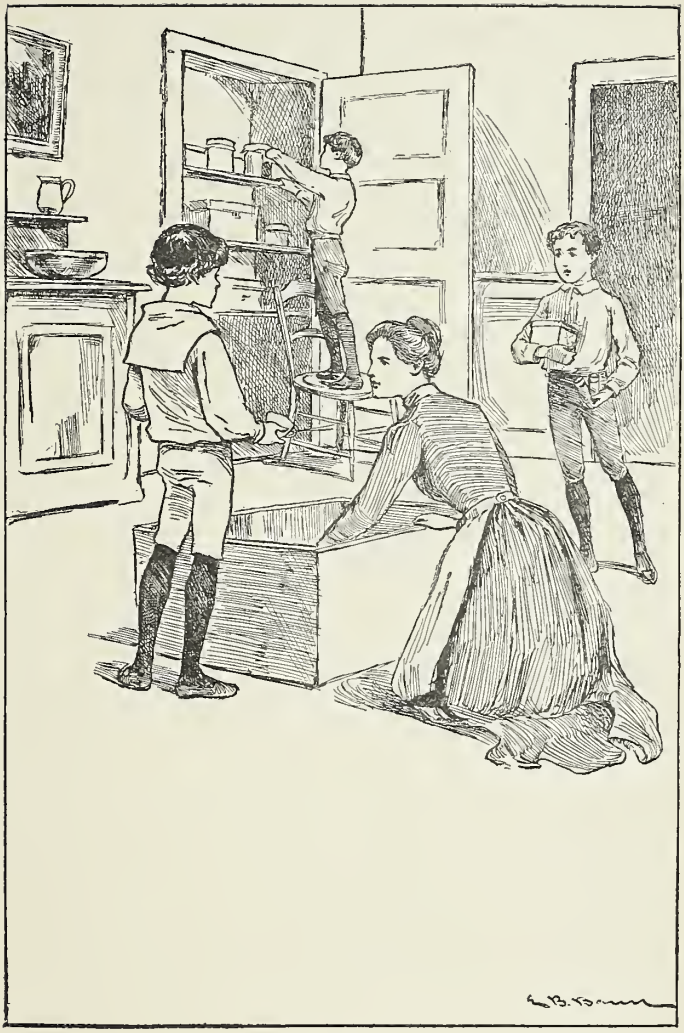
"Mother, oh, mother! Do you reckon the blind mare and the bell will go to Withlacoochee?"

There was a smothered titter from the bedroom, which told that the Crackers had not forgotten, for one moment, in slumber, the exciting prospects of the morrow.

At daybreak, the Captain aroused the family, and an hour or two later the boys followed their mother into a wagon, where William had spread the straw that was to be their beds for the next week.

The Captain climbed to his place, and took the lines.

"We are to meet the Joiners at 'the far



PACKING.

grove,'" said the Captain, "at the point where the road to their cabin crosses the main road."

The Mate was in high spirits, and this encouraged the boys to as much shouting and talking as their capacity would permit.

Soon "the far grove" was reached; and there, in the road, headed for the Withlacoochee, stood the Joiner "turnout."

"Pa, ma, the kids, the old blind mare, bell and all," said Jack, who was immediately reminded of his promises concerning the Joiners.

"Mornin'; mornin', folkses," was the greeting from the wagon, to which the Captain, the Mate, and the Crackers promptly responded, and the procession fell into line for the Withlacoochee.

It was a beautiful drive, through forests of blooming magnolia, rustling palm, and festooned oak.

At noon the wagons were drawn up beside a pool of clear water, "a pond" Mr. Joiner called it, where the horses were fed and rested, while the travellers ate their lunch.

The Mate had insisted upon having sole care of the larder, so that the poor family need feel no chagrin in not furnishing their part.

"You are our guests," the Captain had told

them; "and, therefore, since you are going merely to oblige me, I shall insist upon shouldering the entire expense of the expedition."

"All right, Cap'n," was the reply, and so it chanced the family did not find themselves forced to sit down to a dinner of Cracker bread and potatoes along with their good things. Instead, there were pickles and eggs, boiled hams and light bread, cold chicken, jelly, and pound-cake.

"The last you will see for a week," said the Mate, as she passed the cake around. "Hunters do not expect to live on pound-cake and guava jelly."

"Now that am a fac'," declared Mr. Joiner. "Cake and reesens is for the rich, I reckint. I'll take another bite, mu'm, if you please."

The "bite" was given, in the form of a large slice, the process repeated with the wife and sons, and then the Mate inquired for the *spring*.

"Thar hain't no 'spring,' mu'm," said the Cracker; "but ef hit's the pond ye're wantin', thar's *hit*." And he pointed over his shoulder to the pretty, silver-like pool at which the horses had quenched their thirst.

"A 'pond?'" cried the Mate. "Don't call that pretty pool a 'pond,' Mr. Joiner. It is a *lakelet*. A lakelet is a small lake."

"I see," said the Cracker. "Jest so. A lakelet air a little lake. I ull rickerlict that."

About ten minutes later a cow, one of the half wild Florida cows, that had evidently escaped to the woods, and had been living upon the moss and other wild growth of the hammocks, came down to the pool for water. At her heels, a topsyturvy, rickety-looking calf was following.

"Why," exclaimed the Mate, "if yonder isn't a cow!"

"An' a cowlet, too," added Mr. Joiner, in a dry, drawling tone. The Mate stared a moment, then said, bluntly:

"A *what?*"

"A cowlet, mu'm," was the reply. "Ef a little lake air a lakelet, I 'lowed a little cow ware obleeged to be a cowlet."

At which the company laughed so heartily the Mate was forced to own herself "defeated for once."

When the laugh had subsided, the Captain gave orders for moving on; the teams were put in order, the lunch, or its remains, packed

away, and again the procession headed for the Withlacoochee.

It was near sunset when they stopped again, and camped for the night.

It was not until the fire was made, the kettle filled from the spring, set to boil, and the horses fed and tethered, that the real fun of the trip began.

Mrs. Joiner and the Mate made preparations for supper while the Captain, the boys, and Mr. Joiner took their poles and tramped off to the "Run" after trout.

"Hit ain't more'n a half mile," Mr. Joiner declared, "an' we-uns kin pick up a passel o' trouit in no time."

So off they went, returning, sure enough, in a little while, with a string of fish, ready scaled and dressed for the broiler.

Soon the odors of broiled fish, corn bread, and hot coffee gave interest to proceedings.

The interest increased amazingly when the tin plates and cups were brought out, and all gathered about the cheery camp-fire to exchange jokes and to eat their supper.

There was no table spread; each took his plate on his knee, his tin cup in his hand, and there was no further ceremony expected after

the Captain, with bowed head, had stood up and given thanks for the meal taken in the wilderness.

The three little Crackers were hungry as wolves, yet they could scarcely eat for discussing the wonderful exploits they had been planning during the entire journey.

They found ready comrades in the Joiner boys; for whatever may be said as to the *doubtful* qualities of this couple, they possessed one trait concerning which there was not the faintest shadow of a doubt: as their father had said of them, they certainly were "venturesome." The three little Crackers found them ready to enter into all their plans for hunting deer, bear, and even the "wild painters," the killing of which was to be the chief feather in the cap of the young hunters.

When the matter had been discussed in all its varied lights, a question was suddenly sprung by Cracker Jack, which for a moment threatened to seriously interfere with their arrangements.

"Why," said he, "you haven't got any gun; how can you kill panthers without a gun?"

For a moment the question rather staggered the two, but, with his usual agility, Jake leaped

into the breach which was immediately spanned by the startling rejoinder:

"Borry yo-en."

"No, you won't," declared the *little* Cracker, promptly. "You needn't set up to that, for I say you won't."

"Jack!" the Mate's voice broke in upon the dispute; only that one word, "Jack," but the *little* Cracker understood that it was intended to say:

"Remember your promise concerning these boys: no disputes, no ridiculing, but *charity*, *charity*, *charity*, for their ignorance."

No more was said about the guns that night, but the matter lay heavy on the *little* Cracker's heart until the women began arranging the wagons for sleeping. In the novelty and excitement of these arrangements, all differences were forgotten. And soon the *little* Cracker, after kneeling upon the sand a moment, his boyish face resting against the hub of the wagon wheel, crept into the wagon, and lay down in the straw beside his mother to sleep.

The Captain, with Joe and James, had his pallet under the wagon, while on the other side the camp-fire the Joiner family had made their beds and settled themselves for the night in the same manner.

Soon the little company were fast asleep, with only the stars to keep watch, while in their dreams they still could hear the tinkle of water, the muffled music of the "Run," seeking the more distant Withlacoochee.

CHAPTER X.

CAMP LIFE ON THE WITHLACOOCHEE.

The phosphate was all it had been represented; when the Captain had made sure of that, which he did the very first thing after going into camp, he gave himself up fully to the enjoyment of the holiday.

Mrs. Joiner and the Mate prepared the fish that were brought in from the river, and the "wild meat" brought down in the "swammocks."

One morning the men and boys gave notice they would not return until sunset, as they had found the tracks of a panther in the forest, and they wished to track it to its lair.

So the women made themselves comfortable in camp, not at all uneasy as to the panther, since the hunters had succeeded in killing nothing so far more formidable than a wildcat, two "'possums," and a bear or two.

There was an Indian mound a short distance

A PHOSPHATE MINE.

from camp, and the Mate had succeeded in arousing Mrs. Joiner's interest concerning the curiosities that were hidden there.

Every day they spent a portion of their leisure hours "digging" for relics.

They had brought neither hoe nor pick, so there was nothing with which to dig except sticks, and the iron shovel that had been found in the old cabin.

Their excavations were, therefore, necessarily slow, although promising.

The Mate was firm in her belief that gold was to be found if they would but dig deep enough down for it.

She had found a skull, several implements for cooking, arrow-heads, and several handfuls of beads. The beads, which were of varied size and color, were scattered among the bones, and seemed to have been strung without regard to size or style. There were hundreds of tiny blue beads, green beads, and white. Then there were larger ones, that appeared to have been formed with a knife, or some sharp instrument, out of a white, chalky-looking substance. They were found to be very hard, however, and could not be easily broken.

The women would gather a handful of dirt,

and out of this pick the beads, which were strung and put away among the Mate's relics.

There was another hindrance, however, to their explorations. The mound was a trifle too far from the cabin to ensure perfect safety against the bears, which could be heard constantly, ripping open the palmettoes for their cabbage.

They had "no fancy for being caught in a hole in the ground by a big, hungry bear." Especially were they afraid when "the hole" became of such depth that there was much difficulty to be found in getting out of it.

True, they dug steps to the top, but these could only be climbed by the combined efforts of hands and feet; so a hungry bear would, as the Mate said, have time for a jolly good feast before the explorers could reach the *top of the flight.*

So, as the Mate said, too, they were forced to watch, as well as work. And, finally, it was decided that one of the boys must remain at home every day and watch for bears, while the explorers dug for treasures.

The boys rebelled, you may be sure of that. But rebellion had no effect. They were to take it "turn about" on "picket duty."

It was Cracker Jack's turn to watch on the morning of the panther hunt, but, by special vote, he was excused for that day. The women agreed to let him off, — they would trust to their ears, their steps, and their feet one day.

"But you must be picket to-morrow," the Mate informed him, and, as "to-morrow" always seems vague and distant to the juvenile mind, Cracker Jack readily consented.

There were no new developments in the digging that morning, and the noise in the palmettoes became a trifle too distinct to be entirely pleasant; so at noon the mound was abandoned for the day.

"I believe every bear in the country knows we are alone to-day," the Mate declared, as she "pulled up" by the "steps in the wall."

"Shouldn't wonder," was the ready response, and the usual response, from the woman in the rear; "the Mate's convert to the antique," the Captain called her, on the sly.

When they had cooked and eaten their dinner, they found time hanging a little heavy on their hands, and so the Mate proposed they go fishing.

"Perhaps we'll hook a trout for our hunt-

ers' supper," she said, receiving the usual reply of, "Shouldn't wonder."

They fished for three hours, and caught nothing. Then the Mate lost patience.

"Let's go," she exclaimed. "I believe the fish know we are women."

"Shouldn't wonder," laughed Mrs. Joiner, "an' we ain't got no more worrems, anyways."

"Well," said the Mate, "if the bait is all gone, we will have to stop, whether or no. Let's see now,"— with a glance at the sun, —"suppose we walk down to the river bank, and look for the hunters. It will soon be sunset, see."

Carrying their rods with them, they started down the river bank to meet the hunters.

Down the river bank did not mean they were to find a pleasant stroll along the water's edge. Near the water was swamp land, studded with lettuce and wild lilies. Some hundred yards back, beyond the strip of hammock that bordered the swamp, stretched an open, sandy way, from which the silvery gleam of the water could be seen through the trees and undergrowth. This was the "walk along the river bank."

Beyond this they expected the hunters to emerge from the dense, almost unbroken forest into which no coaxing could induce the women to enter.

The sun was still shining, the cabin in sight and easy reach, and the hunters, doubtless, were on their way home. There was no thought of fear in the heart of either, as the two wives strolled carelessly along through the sand to meet their husbands and sons.

Suddenly, from the narrow strip of hammock between them and the river, issued a cry, — a shrill, sharp cry, so weirdly human, yet so strangely unearthly, that it seemed to chill the very blood in their veins, as they listened.

There is but one animal on earth can utter that weird, wild, half human cry. The two women instinctively understood that it was the cry of the panther the men had been chasing all day. The creature had doubtless left the jungle, and sought shelter in the less suspected covert.

Too frightened to move, they stood for a moment with their eyes fixed upon the hammock, expecting to see the terrible beast spring from its hiding-place. There was a

stir in the undergrowth, — again that inhuman cry, — and both women dropped their fishing-rods, and ran for the camp as for life.

Truly, there was a great story to tell that night while they sat around the camp-fire, having had their supper of wild game, corn bread, and black coffee.

The men were disposed to doubt. "Jest a wil'cat, I reckint," was Mr. Joiner's comment, while the Captain said nothing, but "looked mighty wise," the Mate thought.

The three little Crackers, however, had not a particle of doubt as to the animal that had frightened their mother. They were as positive it was a panther as that they existed, and they were fully resolved, among themselves, before retiring to their straw pallets, that they would take a hunt on the morrow, on their own responsibility, the *little* Cracker having forgotten entirely that it was his day to do sentinel duty at the Indian mound.

But long before the little Crackers had opened their eyes the next morning, Mr. Bus Joiner and the Captain had taken their guns and left the cabin.

"We'll just peep into the brush," the Captain whispered the Mate. "Don't waken the boys,

and wait breakfast; we will be back in time for it."

The Mate did not waken the Crackers to light the fire; a task that had been assigned them at the beginning of their expedition.

"They are worn out with yesterday's tramp," she said to Mrs. Joiner, when the good woman emerged from the cabin with her sleeves pushed up ready to help get the breakfast. "Let them sleep until the men come home. I think we can manage without them one morning."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Mrs. Joiner. "I'll fotch the water while you light the fire. They fotched all the wood and truck last night, poor things."

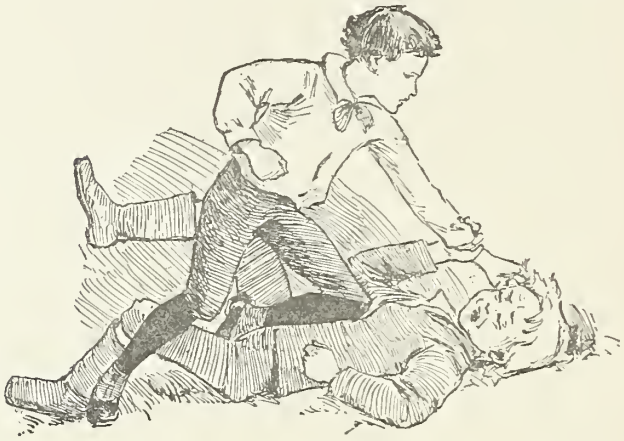
Meanwhile the "poor things" slept on, unconscious of the fine proceedings that were going on in the hammock, near by.

When, half an hour later, they were called to breakfast, and actually *stumbled upon* a beautiful panther which the hunters had killed in the hammock, they found no words in which to express their disappointment at having been permitted to have no hand in the hunt.

"Sleep!" sneered Cracker Jack. "I wonder

who cares to sleep on a hunting trip. Mother, I didn't think you'd do — us — so — "

" He's goin' to cry," said Luke, pointing with exasperating precision at the drop hanging



upon the tip of the *little* Cracker's nose. " He's goin' to *cry*.

> "'Cry, baby, cry,
> Stick yer finger in your eye,
> Tell yer mammy —' "

He never got any further. The *little* Cracker forgot all promises about "charity, charity, charity;" he even forgot the dead panther, and

the failure to waken him for the hunt, as he fairly flew at Luke; and before the Mate could interfere the two were rolling over each other in a way that must have shamed the panther itself, had it been alive to witness the scuffle.

CHAPTER XI.

GETTING EVEN; BEARS; THE OLD WELL.

Cracker Jack was in disgrace for fighting. He had the chagrin of seeing the other boys load their rifles, while the eager-eyed Joiner pair looked on, preparatory to another panther hunt. Jack knew that at that moment Mr. Joiner was skinning the dead panther; for he had heard him telling the Mate that he "reckint he had skunt in and about five hundred wild varmints all told." But Jack could only hear; he was not permitted to take any part in the day's pleasures and excitements.

When, at the last, all was ready, and the hunters started off to the woods, followed as usual by the weaponless Joiner boys, the *little* Cracker realized for the first time how unpleasant, how tantalizing it was to see other boys hunting, and not to be able to join them.

The reflection stirred a good impulse in his heart. He went to the door, and called to Luke:

"Come here," he said, "I want you a minute."

The boy came reluctantly back.

"Gwine fight?" he asked, stopping at a safe distance outside.

"No," replied Jack. "I called you back to lend you my gun."

The boy's eyes fairly shone. "Sho nuff?" said he. "Yer mean it fer true?"

"Yes," said Jack. "There it is, take it, and go. I hope —" and the *little* Cracker's voice trembled — "I hope you'll have a good hunt. I lend you the gun because I fought you."

The delighted Luke went running back to join the boys, flourishing the gun as he ran, and shouting at the top of his voice:

"He lent it ter me 'c'ase he fit me! He lent it to me 'c'ase he fit me!"

The Mate, standing just outside the door, heard every word that had passed. If Jack could have seen her face when she turned it from him a few minutes later, while she tied a veil about her head, he would have noticed that her lips wore a smile of rare tenderness.

But Jack did not see the smile, nor did he know his mother had heard his offer of the gun, so, when she said, "Come, Jack, it is

your day at the Indian mound," he followed her out to the despised mound, under the impression that she was still inflicting upon him the punishment incurred by fighting Luke Joiner.

When he saw his mother and Mrs. Joiner, with their sharp sticks, and buckets for carrying their *find*, go down into the Indian mound, leaving him alone at the entrance, then, indeed, he realized the loneliness that was before him. True, he did smile at the funny manner in which the explorers went in, backward, using both hands and feet like a child that has not learned to walk, but endeavors to go down a flight of steps.

"Now, son," the Mate said, as her face reached a level with the opening, "the excavation is getting real deep, so that it is difficult to get out. Moreover, sound is somewhat deadened by the earth about us. So do you keep your eyes open, and if you should see a bear, do you call to us *instantly*. Don't lose a minute. Scream as hard as you can, and *keep on* screaming. Don't stop until you see us

out of the mound. Do you understand, Jack?"

"Yes, mother," said disconsolate Jack, as he seated himself forlornly to one side the opening, with his face to the hammock.

A few minutes later, when the women had disappeared down their steps, Jack heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Turning quickly, he saw his brothers, Joe and James, coming back from the hunt.

He was about to cry out to them to know why they had turned back, when they motioned him to silence.

"Come here, Jack," said Joe, beckoning furiously the while.

"We didn't care for a hunt without you, to-day," said the *big* Cracker, "so we came back to stay with you."

"Oh, Joe, did you?" said Jack. "Did you really, you and James?"

"Softly, softly," cautioned the *big* Cracker. "We've got a scheme on foot."

"To get even with mother and Mrs. Joiner for not waking us this morning," said James. "Oh, but it's a fine one."

There was a whispered consultation, much gesticulating, many a desperate effort, seem-

ingly, to smother a laugh, and finally the Crackers separated.

Joe and James walked off some little distance and hid themselves behind two large oaks. Jack resumed his watch beside the mound.

For thirty minutes, perhaps longer, there was silence, except for the voices of the two women digging among the graves of the Indians.

Suddenly the little Cracker on guard put his face into the opening and shouted, "Bear! Bear!"

The next instant he was gone; but he strictly obeyed his instructions, for not once did he give over screaming, but shouted, "Bear! Bear! Bear! Bear! Bear!" at the top of his lungs, until he saw his mother and her companion come tumbling out of the mound, veritably covered with dirt, and screaming, "Bear! Bear!" with full as much vehemence as Jack was doing.

Once out, they did not wait to see in which direction the bear was coming, but set out in pursuit of the only object they could see; that was the *little* Cracker's legs making all haste for the camp.

"BEAR! BEAR! BEAR!"

"Bear! Bear!" How they did scream! As if the bear had been just at their heels.

At this moment, Joe and James came rushing up with their guns, and crying, "Where? Where is the bear, mother?"

"Why —" the Mate turned to look for the bear; then she turned to look for Jack. He had vanished utterly.

"You, Jack?" she called. "Where is there any bear?"

A muffled, laughter-choked voice replied from within the cabin:

"In the *woods*, mother."

"Mother," said James, slyly, "don't you think we are about even now? You will wake us up for the next panther hunt, will you not, mother?"

"Get out; every one of you," replied the Mate, with a ridiculous attempt at severity. "No, we are *not* even. You will bear in mind, young gentlemen, that I consider you are *one ahead*, and that *I* shall, sooner or later, 'get even.' Be off with you; playing pranks upon your mother! Off, I say!"

The *little* Cracker looked wistfully at his mother.

"May I 'be off' also?" he asked, hesitatingly.

The Mate drew the boy to her side, and, bending her head, left a kiss upon the boyish, upturned face.

"Yes, go and enjoy the day you have made pleasant for another. I heard Luke shooting over in the hammock a little while ago."

So the joke upon their mother terminated satisfactorily to the little Crackers. As they went off, however, to examine their traps, and see what they could "pick up" in the way of game along the edge of the hammock, they speculated no little as to the joke their mother was plotting against them, as a means of "evening up things."

"It will be a good one, you can depend upon that," said Joe. "I know mother; when she sets her head to do a thing, as Mr. Joiner says, 'it's sot.'"

Still, as the day passed on, they went home to dinner, and nothing was said or done, they concluded she had forgotten all about it, and so they, too, allowed it to slip their minds.

Near the cabin, some little distance to the right of the Indian mound, was an old well, or the commencement of a well, which the former owner of the place had begun to dig, but had never completed. This well — it was not

more than ten feet deep — was carefully covered during the day and night, for fear the horses might slip their halters, and, falling into it, break their legs or necks.

This hole — it amounted to nothing more — was a favorite resort with the boys. They had arranged seats at the bottom of the pit by means of stumps and the trunks of small saplings, found on the edge of the hammock.

They let themselves down to this retreat — they called it their "conference room" — by means of a rope, the rope used for the bundles of bedding brought to the camp. This rope was securely fastened to an oak that grew convenient to the well, and reached, "barely reached," the tip of Jack's fingers when he stood upon one of the seats of the conference room.

One end of the line hung in the well *always;* the boys declaring they would take no risks on their "ladder," as it was their sole means of ascending and descending into and out of their retreat.

When they wished to go down, they seized the rope and slid, hand over hand, down the line, until their feet touched the "seats" at the bottom.

Coming up, they took hold upon the rope, pressed their feet, or knees, against the wall of the pit, and pulled themselves to the top.

After dinner, on the day of the bear scare, the Crackers retired to the conference room for consultation regarding the next day's sport.

The Mate, busy with clearing away the dinner, saw them descend, and slyly winked at Mrs. Joiner, who was scraping the "leavings" from a frying-pan in which a couple of fish had lately sputtered and browned.

"A good time to pay yer grudge, ain't hit?" she asked, as keenly intent upon vengeance as was the Mate herself.

"An admirable time," replied the Mate. "Just the very best time I could possibly desire. But we must not hurry *too* much; allow them ten minutes in which to 'settle down to business.'"

When the ten minutes were up the dinner things had been cleared away, and the Mate and her accomplice were ready for business, also.

"Now," said the Mate, "do you run and get the bell from the mare's neck. Don't allow it to tinkle *once*, if you can prevent it. Muffle the clapper with your hand, and bring the bell to me under the oak-tree."

And while little Mrs. Joiner ran around to the shed (a shed constructed of boughs, moss, and brush), to despoil the claybank of her adornment, the Mate hurried out to the oak around which the rope of ascent and descent was fastened.

She waited, her hand upon the line, until the sound of voices in the conference room assured her the boys were in the midst of some interesting discussion.

Then she gently, cautiously, noiselessly gave a slight pull upon the rope, drawing it about a foot up, no more; she knew they could not possibly reach it, yet would not suspect anything, as they would be sure to do if she drew it entirely out of the well.

"In their frantic efforts to seize it they will simply suppose they have missed it," she argued, to her own mind.

She fastened the line by crossing it into a loop and passing a sharp stake through the loop into the ground. Then she took the bell, listened a moment for a lull in the discussion, and then tinkled the bell softly.

"Hello!" came from below, "the claybank's loose."

The bell tinkled on, softly at first, as if the

mare was feeding at some distance. Then the sound grew a trifle more distinct, as the Mate moved towards the well. Nearer still; a voice below shouted, authoritatively:

"Whoa, up there!"

The bell tinkled on, nearer the pit's edge.

"Whoa!" again came the command, more emphatic than before. There was just a hint of fear in the voice this time.

But the bell refused to obey. The listeners below realized that it was *very* near the pit's edge.

"Whoa! Whoa!" They shouted in chorus. "She's going to tumble in on us," Jack's voice announced above the cries of "Whoa! Whoa!" "Whoa, up there, you old blind bat, you—" "Whoa! Whoa!"

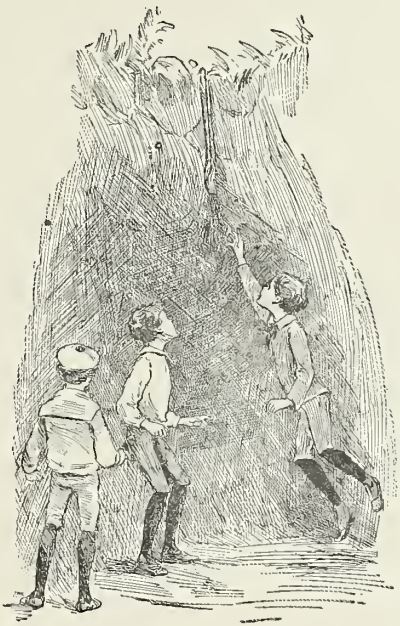
But the bell drew nearer and nearer. It was so close, indeed, the Mate could tell the very moment when the Crackers sprang for the rope—*and missed it.*

Then the bell tinkled at the very verge of the pit, and such a shout as went up from the conference room. Mrs. Joiner stuffed her apron in her mouth for fear the boys would hear her laugh.

"Mother!" "Mother!" "Whoa!" "Whoa,

up there!" "Oh, mother! Won't you lead the old mare away?" "Mother!" "Mother!"

At that moment the Mate's face appeared over the edge of the pit; she held the bell in full view of the terrified Crackers, and shouted "Bears! Bears!" before she ran away to laugh with Mrs. Joiner over the success of the plot.



The Crackers were completely routed. They didn't even dare to chirp over the bear scheme to the Captain when they gathered that night round the camp-fire.

The Mate told about it, however, and about the *bell scare*, too. And when the laugh had subsided, the Crackers admitted, reluctantly, that they had been "sold."

"Still, mother," said James, "you did run. Oh, how you did run from that bear!"

"And you did *holler*," added Jack. "I never heard anybody holler so."

"That is because you were not on the outside when the claybank threatened to walk into the well," said the Mate. And again the verdict was that the Mate had the best of the joke.

"We-uns air afeard of b'ar," Mrs Joiner admitted. "We-uns air mighty 'feared of *b'ar*. But for *hosses* now, well, we ain't so might'ly skeered o' hosses, as *some* air."

And the three little Crackers said never a word.

CHAPTER XII.

A RESCUE; TWO FAMOUS LETTERS; SPEECH-MAKING.

The little Crackers were at home again; they had enjoyed their holiday, and so, too, had the older people, but they had all come back to Col Alto with a kind of feeling that frolics are good, now and then, but, after all, home is the best thing. It has such a restful air, such a good, safe air.

"I tell you, mother," said Cracker Joe, as he stretched himself on a sofa, "this place is much handsomer than I thought it. Why, when we first came the walls seemed too low, after our Alabama home, and they *did* look shabby, those logs and that daubing did. But somehow it looks really fine now. And the ceiling seems high enough for anybody."

The Mate smiled, and worked on with the sock she was darning. She was not ready to explain that it was contrast, in each instance,

that had affected the Cracker's opinion of their cabin on the hill. She wished the boys to feel satisfied with their home and surroundings. If the cabin by the Withlacoochee had accomplished that for them, she would not regret the holiday, certainly.

"We did have a *good* time, though," Joe added, as if his words might have conveyed a hint of disappointment regarding their trip. "We did have a good time, and no mistake."

"Except the Joiner boys," added Jack, who had entered the room unnoticed. "The Joiners were a 'mistake.' I mean the Joiner boys."

"Jack?"

"Now, mother," said the Cracker, "the contract ended with the expedition. I don't have to be polite to them here, where they are on their own ground. They are out in our boat this blessed minute, without asking us; how can a fellow like boys that do such things?"

"I think, Jack," said the Mate, "that if you would endeavor to make friends of those boys, instead of waging war against them, you would find it an easier way out of your annoyances from them."

"Friends!" said Jack. "I don't want *them* for friends! I want our boat. I wish it would

upset 'em in the lake and give 'em such a scare they would let it be. That's what I wish," declared the *little* Cracker; and nothing the Mate could say — she said a good deal, you may be sure — could induce him to regard the Joiner pests as other than a nuisance and a worry.

"You would feel bad enough if the boat *should* upset and endanger the boys' lives," she told him.

"No, mother, I wouldn't," the *little* Cracker insisted. "I wish it would scare them good. I heard Joe say the same thing, and James wishes it, too, only he won't say so."

"I am glad to know I have *one* son too noble to give expression to wicked wishes," said the Mate, folding the socks, that had been neatly darned during the discussion, and put away in the work-basket.

"You will both learn some day that kindness conquers more speedily and more effectually than force. You will learn, too, for it is one of life's inevitable lessons, that thoughtless wishes come back upon the wisher, often with interest, too, and at a moment when they are least expected or desired. I hope you may not learn this by experience, however. Now, run away

and dress yourselves. We are all to go over to Drake Point to tea with Uncle James this evening."

The Crackers were rejoiced to hear this. There was nothing they enjoyed more than a visit to the Point. Uncle James had travelled a great deal, and knew so much that was interesting. But he was an invalid, and so it was only on rare occasions the boys were allowed entire evenings with him.

"I shall ask him about the Pilgrims' Rock at Plymouth, and the things in the hall there, that once belonged to Myles Standish. He has seen them all, and promised to tell me about them. He says lots of people believe the rock is a fraud, and that the Pilgrims did not land on it at all. I shall ask him all about it this evening;" and the Cracker began his preparations for the visit with alacrity.

"He promised to tell me about the Hermitage and Old Hickory," said Jack. "I'd rather hear about the little Indian Old Hickory brought home from the Creek War, than to hear all about the *foreigners* who landed on the rock."

"*My* story comes first," the *big* Cracker insisted, as he dipped his face into a basin of fresh water. "I claimed first. Besides, you know

all about that Indian story. You know his tribe had all been killed — "

"His family," corrected the *little* Cracker.

"No, his tribe," Joe insisted, and the *little* Cracker said no more, although Joe knew he had not really yielded his opinion; he merely wished to hear again the story of the old hero whose name he bore.

"His *tribe* had all been killed," Joe went on to say, between the dabs he made into the wash-bowl, "and the Indians wanted to kill *him*, too. That was their custom. But one *good* Indian picked up the little Indian and brought him to General Jackson. And the general sent the little Indian home to play with his own son."

"Didn't have any 'own son,'" said the *little* Cracker. "He only had an adopted son. And he sent the Indian home because, he said, he

reminded him of his own self. *He* was left all by himself when his mother died of smallpox, nursing soldiers, and his brother died, too, and only the boy Andrew was left. So he wrote his wife and told her so, and told her to keep the boy in the house and take care of him. I saw the letters my own self; a lady from Tennessee had them in Alabama, and she got them at the Hermitage, and mother made a copy of them for me, because the lady gave the originals to uncle."

"Oh, I know all about that," said the *big* Cracker. "I know the Indian's name, too, and you don't."

"It was Lyncoya," said the *little* Cracker, jubilantly. "But they shortened it to 'Linco,' the slaves at the Hermitage did. Now!"

"'Now,'" said Joe, "I'm ready. And 'now' I don't see why a boy wants to hear a story he knows all by heart. That's what *I* say. *Now!*"

And the *big* Cracker ran off to enjoy, in contemplation, the wonderful stories he would hear during the evening from Uncle James.

He ran down to the lake to see if the Joiners had returned with the boat. No, it was still missing, and the lake was rougher, he thought, than he had ever seen it.

"Why, they can't row in a wind like *this*," he exclaimed, involuntarily. And then he remembered his ugly wish that the boat would upset and "pitch the boys into the water."

It seemed a very dreadful wish now, when a possibility of its fulfilment stared him in the face. He had an impulse to get in the other boat and go out after them. He knew he could manage it, for his father had said he was a "fine rower," and Joe knew, himself, that his arms were strong and his head cool on the water.

"But I have on my new suit," he told himself; "and if I go I'll miss the Pilgrims, and spoil my clothes, and — *I won't!* They are not worth it."

He really thought, however, that he *would*, until William came down and told him he thought the boys had crossed the lake. And, in that case, they would know better than to return in such a wind.

"And the Captain says," William continued, "you are to wait and go over in the 'no-top' with him. Your mother and the boys have gone on to the Point in the spring wagin."

Joe did not quite like the idea of waiting; but it sounded a trifle important to be told he was "to go over with his father," so he said

nothing more than that he hoped his father would not be *very* late going.

The truth was, the *big* Cracker was afraid of missing that Jackson story. He was every whit as fond of it as was Cracker Jack. He would not miss the reading of Old Hickory's letter to his wife, telling about the Creek War, and the Indian boy, Lyncoya, "Oh, not for *anything*." Uncle James possessed the real letters; there were two of them, telling of Lyncoya; "the genuine articles," he called them, which the Tennessee lady had given him. Such *old* letters, written in *1813;* so musty, "mellow," Uncle James called them, and so queer. No envelopes, but just a funny folding of one sheet of paper over another, with a little dab of red wax to hold it.

And no postage stamps on them, only a notice down in one corner to show that they were sent "by the bearer of the express."

They were addressed to Mrs. Rachel Jackson, Hermitage, near Nashville, Tennessee. Oh, he knew those old letters by heart; they were so queer.

"Jack thinks he's the only one to like Old Hickory, because he's named for him," said Joe. "But oh, I *do* want to see those

old letters! Though I don't want Jack to know."

There was one who did know, however. Uncle James had not watched the faces of his nephews for nothing when he told them of the old hero of the Indian wars and of New Orleans. And he had refused to begin Cracker Jack's story until Joe should arrive, or else some news of him. For at eight o'clock the Captain had not put in an appearance, and had sent no reason for the delay. When, fifteen minutes later, he did arrive, alone, but with a very touching excuse from Joe, the story-telling began. But Uncle James had not forgotten the brave *big* Cracker who had not accepted his invitation to tea. The "splendid uncle" had a little idea of his own that he did not include in the story of Lyncoya. Nor did the listening Crackers dream of what their uncle was thinking when he said, in folding the precious letters:

"Take your last look; this is the last time your Uncle James intends to exhibit these documents."

The *big* Cracker, meantime, was spending a very different sort of evening.

When it began to grow dark he became

very restless to be off to the Point. But the Captain was not quite ready; he had been detained until "almost too late to go," he declared.

While waiting, Joe went back and forth, to and from the lake. There was an uneasy feeling in his heart, — what if those boys had upset in the lake?

It was a raw night, although clear; the wind blew until the water actually hissed. The idea of those two children, unused as they were to boats, attempting to cross the lake on such a night was terrible.

William went down to draw the remaining skiff farther up out of the water.

"It do beat so!" he explained to Joe. "The water do beat so ag'inst the boats."

"William," said Joe, "*do* you think those boys are on the other side?"

"Their pappy says he reckints they went 'cross to their uncle's and will stay all night," replied the hired man. "*He* ain't skeered 'bout 'em; we-alls needn't be."

"Hush!" said Joe. "What is that? Wait! I heard a cry. Oh, William, bring me the oar-locks, quick, and the oars. Somebody is calling for help. Run! It is those boys; and

they have neither oars nor oar-locks. They stole the boat, and went out with only two paddles which they made. Here! Tell father not to wait for me."

The man had dragged the oars and locks from their hiding-place under the steps. He pulled the boat out and fastened the locks while Joe was getting in. It had all happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, the man had not thought of raising a protest. It was doubtless that cry of helpless terror that urged him on, as it was urging the brave rescuer who was pulling with all his strength towards the spot from which the call seemed to come.

"Help! Help!" Above the hissing of the waves he heard it. And he heard, also, deep down in his heart, the echo of that wicked wish, that the boat would upset.

He remembered his mother's words: "They come back at a moment when they are least expected or desired."

"Help! Help! We are — *drowning!*"

He heard the words distinctly, and knew he was drawing near to the boys. He plied the oar with new strength as he shouted, to encourage them: "*Hold on;* I am coming." Three times he repeated the call, and hear-

ing no reply, he concluded they must have drowned. He tried again, however:

"*Hold on ;* I am coming, — *coming !*"

"Waal, yer better come on, then," said a voice near by, "elst we'll drowen."

Then the *big* Cracker felt a reaction take place.

"*Drown*, then!" said he. "You *ought* to drown. Where are you, anyhow?"

"Right here," replied the voice of Jake. "We's holdin' ter the boat; hit's turnt over."

Guided by the voice, Joe pulled on. It was darker now, but he managed to find the upset boat, and rowing around it, felt in the darkness until his hand touched one of the boys' heads. He jerked him by the collar as his boat moved

on, and pulled him in, dropping him, like a fish, in the bottom of the skiff.

"Much obleeged ter yer," said Jake, when he felt bottom.

"*Shut up!*" said Joe. "I want none o' your 'much obleegin'.'"

The truth was, Joe began to think of the Point about this time, and the good things he was missing.

He rowed back, however, and pulled Luke in, and then, with the help of Jake, he succeeded in righting the overturned boat and in towing it back to the wharf.

Then he went off to bed, after a look at his clothes, which were soaked by the water, but which William assured him would "come dry *in time*."

Sleep was another matter, however. For just as he would be ready to drop off, something would "pop up into his head," so he told the Mate afterwards, and say, "He's telling about Myles Standish's sword now." Or else, "He has finished Old Hickory," or "Just at this minute they are looking at the letters." And away sleep would go for that time.

He got up at last, and dressed, and went out to talk with William until the others

should get home. And when they did come, earlier than he expected them, and his mother handed him a little package, "with Uncle James's compliments," he was so heartily glad that he had rescued the Joiners instead of going away for his own pleasure that he could almost have shouted aloud his joy.

For the package contained a note from Uncle James, enclosing the letters. Not copies; but the genuine, original letters, musty and old, and indeed "mellow," written by Old Hickory from Strother to his wife in the far-away Hermitage. And in the letters was the story of the Indian boy, Lyncoya, whom he had rescued from the Creeks, who would have put him to death, according to their custom, when the other members of his family had been slain. In the letter the great general explained to his wife that it was a feeling of sympathy that had moved him to rescue the little savage, and to send him home to the Hermitage. Lyncoya's situation had so closely resembled his own, at a time when the fortunes of war had left him, likewise, alone in the world.

The Crackers leaned their elbows upon the table, and studied the dim old sheets until the Mate called bedtime. Then they crept into

bed, wondering if they, too, might not be so fortunate as to have the privilege of fighting for their country some day, and speculating upon the chances of a rebellion on the part of old Tiger Tail, the peaceable old chief over on the Indian River.

The following morning there was a consultation at Col Alto. The Mate was closeted for more than an hour with the three little Crackers.

The Captain, passing the door, which was locked upon the inside, heard a sound as of some one rehearsing a speech. He heard enough to give him a hint as to what was going on. His face wore a smile as he tiptoed past the door, and he whispered himself something about a steam yacht: "They shall have a steam yacht if they do that," he told himself.

Later in the day William was despatched to the Joiner cabin to tell the boys, Luke and Jake, they were especially wanted at Col Alto.

The Crackers met them at the gate, and the Mate, concealed behind the jasmine arbor, saw Joe, as master of ceremonies, conduct the visitors to the steps that led down to the lake

shore, where the two rowboats were lying, side by side. From her position she could see and hear all that passed.

The little Crackers had been persuaded to give one of the rowboats to the Joiner boys. She had made it easier to accomplish by giving a little ceremony to the occasion. Jack was to make the presentation speech, with Joe to prompt him in case of failure. James was reserved for a last resort in case both the others failed.

"Now, boys," the Mate had said, "be very careful not to remind the boys of their former conduct regarding the boat. Do not say they *stole* it, whatever you say."

"But, mother, they did," James had insisted.

But the Mate ignored the interruption. "And do not," she continued, "give them a *hint* that you are buying them with a gift."

"But we are," James would have it so. "You know we are giving them one of our boats so that they will let the other one be."

"Why," the Mate replied, "I thought it was because you truly intended to try to influence the boys to a more correct sense of honor."

James had not responded to this further than by a doubtful shake of the head, so

THE LITTLE CRACKER'S MAIDEN SPEECH.

that the Mate retired behind the jasmine arbor with rather doubtful feelings as to the entire success of the occasion.

When the boys reached the steps they stopped.

Joe, James, and Jack removed their caps, seeing which, the Joiner boys did the same.

Cracker Jack stepped forward and began:

"Boys," said he, "and — boys" (the speech as taught by the Mate was "boys and *friends*"). "We sent for you to-day in order to present to you" (it was the *little* Cracker's maiden speech; there were visible signs of emotion as the speaker proceeded) "to present to you — one of the — one of our boats. In doing this we wish to — to — tell you — to *assure* you that — that — that we give you this boat to keep you from stealing ours —"

"No!" Joe hurried to the rescue. "Not that, Jack; mother said we mustn't mention that. We give you this boat for — for — for *not* stealing ours."

It was James's turn; he realized that both speakers had failed to say the proper thing. It rested with him, therefore, to smooth the ruffled feelings of the visitors, and at the same time to rescue the Mate's fine speech.

Full of the importance of the occasion, he rose proudly to the effort:

"The boys have not said what they intended, Luke," said he. "They meant to say that we give you this boat to keep you from stealing ours *any more*."

And the Mate in her arbor laughed softly and declared, "'Truth is mighty, and will prevail.'"

CHAPTER XIII.

BIJOU AND THE ALLIGATORS.

"DEAR me!" exclaimed the Mate, one morning at the breakfast-table. "Do you know, Captain, it is almost a year since we discussed the school question?"

"Eight months, mother," said the *little* Cracker. "It is only eight months."

"Eight and four are *twelve*," replied the Mate. "Now that the new house is begun, the boys are well and strong, the grove flourishing, we must think of our Crackers. Brother James has offered to get a tutor from among his old college friends, and I have accepted the offer. He promised to have him here the week of our removal into the new house. He comes from Tennessee."

"I hope he isn't a softy," said Jack. "And I hope he isn't as fierce as a bear, either."

"Was Old Hickory a 'softy?'" said James. "He was a Tennessean, too." At which the

little Cracker rushed to the defence of his hero by declaring that he was not born a Tennessean really, since the Big Bend State was at that time but a part of the great Territory of North Carolina. "Though," the *little* Cracker admitted, "he *did* have a farm, and a law office, and a race-track, and was judge in Tennessee."

"Boys," said the Mate, "we are not discussing Old Hickory just at present, but your new tutor. Understand, he will be here sometime in October, and you will then be expected to go gracefully into harness. You have had a long, pleasant holiday."

"I shall not be sorry to go to work, mother," said Joe. "Fun is a good thing, but I believe a boy *could* get tired of a good time. I shall be really glad to see my books again."

"I am glad to hear it," said the Mate, "and I hope your example will not be lost upon your brothers."

At this moment William put his head in at the door to say that Mr. James wished for Master Jack to come over to the Point on Bijou, and go for a short ride with him. He had sent his man Ike over to bring the message and to ride back with the little master.

"THE LITTLE CRACKER RODE OFF ON HIS LITTLE PONY."

"May I, mother?" said Jack, his face expressive of the pleasure the invitation foretold.

"Yes," replied the Mate, "but don't ride too near Uncle Ike's horse; it is a vicious animal, and Bijou might get a kick."

So the *little* Cracker rode off on his *little* pony, feeling very important as well as very happy.

A few minutes after Jack's departure, Mr. Bus Joiner dropped in. Dropped out, would perhaps more appropriately express the style of the visit, since he stood without, leaning upon the window-sill, a fishing-rod in one hand, a tin bucket containing "a col' snack" in the other.

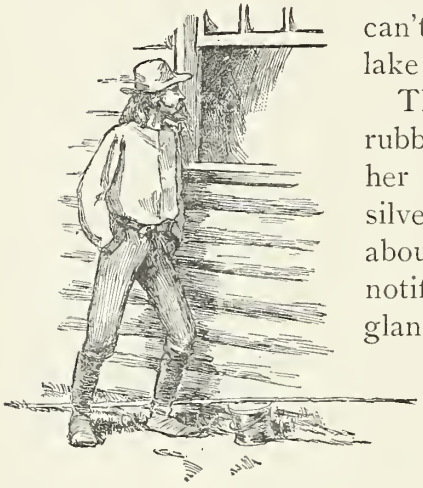
"Mis' Parish," said he to the Mate, who was still sitting in her place at the breakfast-table, polishing the spoons, the other members of the family having dispersed about the place according to their several inclinations.

"Mis' Parish, I drapped by ter tell yeou about that thar nag o' Master Jack's."

"Well, Mr. Joiner," replied the Mate, "what has Bijou been doing? I hope he hasn't been troubling things over your way."

"Lor', no, mu'm," said the visitor, "he wouldn't do that; he's too well acquainted

with our folkses fur that. An' thar ain't nothin' thar nohows, 'thout'n hit be the ole 'oman an' the childern. Hit's about hisse'f I ware a thinkin'; he'd ought ter be kep' out'n the lake. I jest called by, drapped in as it ware, ter say ter that thar nag as how 'gators an' hosses can't occupy the same lake *at onc't*."



The Mate smiled, as she rubbed vigorously upon her great-grandmother's silver teaspoons. She was about to say, "Have you notified the pony?" but a glance at the sober face of her neighbor caused her to say instead:

"Has he been in the lake again, Mr. Joiner?"

"Yes, mu'm. An' I'm *afeard* the blind 'gator 'll fetch him off some o' these days. Ever sence the white sower ware took I hev been a-expectin' uv the nag ter go. I see his tracks, fresh tracks, Mis' Parish, showin' whar he hev been in swimmin' no longer'n yistiddy; an'

sez I, the blind 'gator'll git yeou yit, sir, some o' these days, same's it done the white sower."

"The white sow! *Whose* sow?" the Mate inquired with interest. That was a calamity that had not been reported to her.

"Why, you-unses," said Mr. Joiner. "It ware this erway. I ware deown ter the lake, aimin' ter ketch a trouit fur we-unses dinner. I ware tolerble still so's not ter skeer the fish off, an' I reckint the big 'gator didn't know I ware reound. An' ez fur me, I ware not thinkin' o' the 'gator no more'n nothin', though hit ware layin' sorter pulled up out'n the water like. Might a-nibbled at me stid o' the sower if hit ware so minded, I ware that clos't. But bein' blind, I reckint he didn't sight me. An' the wind blowin' contrary, I reckint he didn't scent the flavior uv me. So he jest lay thar an' snoozed.

"Ayfter a bit the white sower kem a-trippin' down ter the water, nosyin' inter things, an' puttin' on all manner o' airs. Thinkin' the critter'd nose inter my snack bucket, I sez, sez I, '*Sovey!*'

"But she jest trotted right on, same's ef I hadn't soveyed, right on, tell she run smack agin the big 'gator. Sez I ag'in, louder'n

before times, '*Sovey!*' An' sez she, peartly, 'Humph!'

"An' jest then a big black somethin' riz up out'n the water; a long tail whizzed round, a pair o' big jaws opened up, the tail *slapped* the white peeg in, an' all went deown together. I see hit with my own eyes. An' sez I when I see them tracks yistiddy, 'Mr. Beeshoo, youuns'll go the way o' the white sower yet, ef yer hain't keerful.' An' I thought hit ud look onneighborly not ter stop by an' say so."

The Mate thanked the visitor for his trouble, and said she would have to "*speak* to Bijou. That was a *fish tale* not to be disregarded."

"A '*gator* tail, Mis' Parish," the narrator corrected; "hit's the 'gators fights with thar tails. I reckint a 'gator couldn't be said ter be a fish."

Poor Bijou,—the Captain had already threatened to sell him if he could not be kept away from the lake. The threat had created such an outbreak among the little Crackers, however, that the good Captain speedily relented.

"You must watch him yourselves, then," he compromised the matter by saying. "You

must watch him yourselves, and if the alligators eat him, you need not expect another pony, that's all."

So the little Crackers had taken the matter in hand, and for some weeks there had been no report of the pet having been in the forbidden waters.

One morning, however, to quote from Mr. Bus Joiner, he had "come up missing."

It was the morning Jack rode over to his uncle's with Ike; the identical morning when notice was served upon the Mate that he would surely "go the way of the white sower" unless measures were taken to prevent.

Jack had ridden off in high spirits. He found his uncle astride his big bay, Prince, at the "big gate," waiting for him.

In a little while they were riding away, side by side, towards the hammock, through which a pleasant, shaded road had been cut.

"We will have to take it leisurely, Jack," said Uncle James, "and also keep rather in the shade of the hammock. Violent exercise and too much heat are not good for invalids, they say back there at the house; but they have not prohibited story-telling yet. So if they cheat us of a brisk canter, we will outwit them

by a pleasant story. 'It's an ill wind turns none to good,' Master Jack."

"That's what mother says," Jack replied. "Then she has another good one that might fit into your case, uncle," he continued. "It is something about 'compensation,' but it means that what you miss one way is always made up to you in another way."

"An excellent 'fit,' Jack," laughed Uncle James, "a most excellent 'fit.'"

So they chatted pleasantly — the uncle and nephew were very congenial company indeed — until they reached the hammock.

But just as they were entering the wood, both horses stopped, threw up their heads, began to breathe heavily through their nostrils, planted their fore feet firmly, and refused to stir.

"Why, uncle," cried Jack, "I never saw Bijou do so before — "

"They smell some kind of wild animal," said Uncle James, in a low voice. "Turn back, Jack; they will not pass it."

When the animals had been wheeled about, Uncle James said, "Ride back to the house, Jack, and tell your aunt to send my gun."

It required no second bidding to make the *little* Cracker "ride."

A wild animal! An adventure come to meet them of its own accord! It seemed too good to be true.

"Wait," said Uncle James, as Jack was cantering off.

"It is a *gun*, not one of those little concerns you boys are accustomed to handling. Are you sure you can manage it?"

"Perfectly sure, uncle," said Jack. "I will be very careful; you need have no fears."

"Go, then, and be quick about it," said Uncle James. And in a few minutes the *little* Cracker came cantering back with the gun lying across the saddle before him.

"Is your pony nervous?" said Uncle James, dismounting, and taking the gun.

"No, sir," said Jack, who was dismounting, also, "but mother requires us to get down when there is any shooting. Besides, sir, I would like to go along with you."

"Well, — I think it will be safe," said his uncle, half hesitating. "Hitch your pony to a sapling, and come."

They had scarcely gotten well into the wood, when they heard a low, fierce growl from a jungle upon their right.

The uncle motioned silence. "Something

unusual there," he whispered. "The creature neither attempts to escape nor offers to attack us. Wait here, Jack."

Jack stood in the road, while his uncle broke an opening into the thicket from which the savage snarls were sounding.

A moment later there was a sharp report, and the snarling ceased. Then Uncle James appeared on the edge of the thicket, laughing.

"I say, Jack," he called, "how long is it since something ran away with my steel trap in your father's banana grove?"

"Eight months, uncle," replied Jack. "I heard mother say so this very morning."

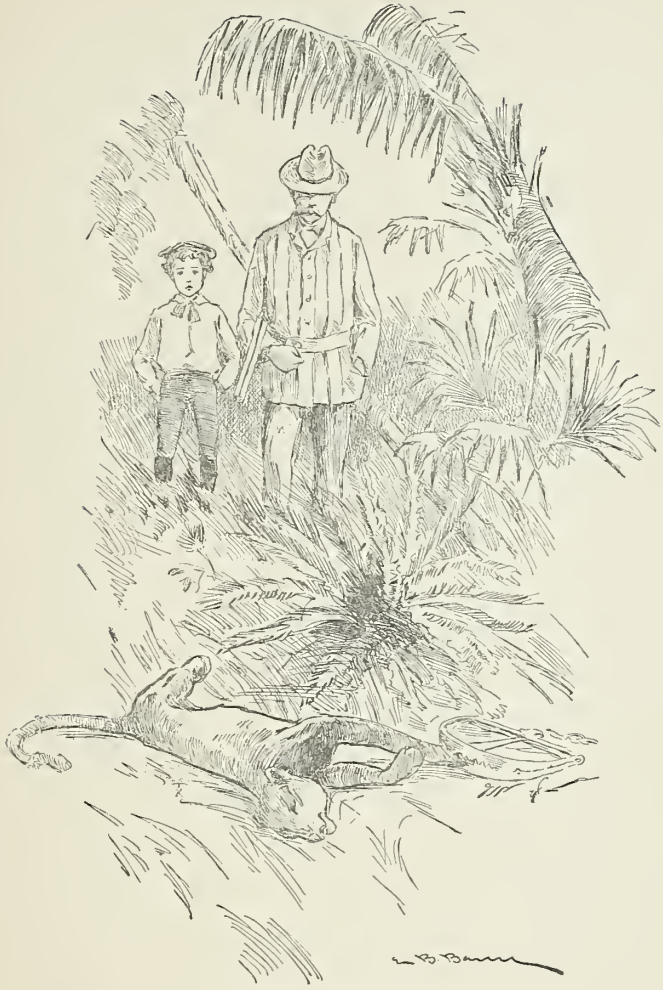
"Eight months! Come here, Jack."

The boy followed his uncle into the thicket, where, when the brush and growth had been pushed aside, he saw a lean, half starved wild-cat lying there dead, a bullet in its brain, and the missing trap still clinging to its foot.

"Now," said his uncle, "what do you think of that?"

"I think," said the astonished *little* Cracker, "that at last I know who stole the bear-trap."

Such a terrible-looking thief as it was! It had carried the steel trap on its foot for eight months.



THE TRAP FOUND.

"It has literally *starved*," said Uncle James. "But the real wonder is, that it did not die long ago."

He stooped, touched a spring, and removed the trap.

"So simple, and yet so sure," he said. "And that is an idea worth noting, Jack. The sure things of life are operated by a very simple machinery; it is the complications that make confusion. You will find the rule to apply to the moral as well as the natural world, where *truth* is the simple thing that unlocks the traps set for the unwary."

"Yes, sir," said Jack, wondering vaguely how it was that his uncle always found something wonderful, a lesson, a sermon, or a story, in everything with which he came in contact.

"Uncle," — the lost trap was too much for the *little* Cracker's patience, however, — "I should like to ride home and tell father about that trap."

"I was about to suggest that we change our plans, and make Col Alto our objective point," said Uncle James. "That will be a very good ride on a morning like this. Why, Jack, where is your pony?"

Sure enough, Bijou was missing. In the

excitement, the *little* Cracker had not secured him well, and he had contrived to slip his fastenings and had run away to Col Alto.

"Well," said Jack, "I call that cool!"

"Gone home, I suspect," said Uncle James. "Scramble up behind me; the Prince will 'tote double,' as Mr. Joiner says, and we will soon catch up with the runaway."

Soon they related the wonderful story of the stolen trap to the family at Col Alto. There had been exclamations and interrogations sufficient to fill a chapter. In the midst of the excitement, William appeared around the house and beckoned to Jack.

"I hates to tell you, Master Jack," said he, "but if you please to just look *a-there!*"

He pointed to Bijou, standing meekly by with bowed head and subdued air, very much resembling a boy who had been into forbidden paths and has met with unpleasant adventures.

Jack gave one long, horrified glance at the pony's flank, which lay open to the bone, the skin and torn flesh hanging almost to the ground. In an instant he understood that at last the prophecies of Cracker Bus had been fulfilled, and that Bijou had come in contact with the blind alligator. Jack never once

thought of scolding, however; that ugly, gaping wound drove all feeling save that of tenderness from his heart. His lip quivered, something suspiciously sparkling sprang to his eyes and trembled a moment upon his cheek. And then the *little* Cracker threw his arms about his pony's neck and burst into tears.

"Oh, Bijou!" he sobbed, "poor, poor Bijou! Run for father, William; run for father, quick."

But the worst of all, to Jack, was the sewing of the skin again.

First Bijou objected to being thrown. They did get him upon his side at last, however, and the Captain clipped away the bits of mangled flesh, bathed and anointed the wound until the blood had ceased to flow; after which, while William and the boys assisted, he drew the wound carefully together until the gaping rent was closed, tenderly replaced the skin, or hide, and with skilful, dexterous stitches fastened it into position.

"And now," said he, when the last stitch had been taken and Bijou assisted to his feet again, "if lockjaw doesn't set in, he is safe enough. But," he added, slowly and earnestly, "*there will be a scar.*"

And there was indeed an ugly scar, that

never disappeared; the Crackers called it his "*Insignia of Disobedience*."

One thing was noticeable, however, — Bijou never ventured into the lake again.

The Mate, to be sure, could not miss the opportunity for turning her little sermon out of the adventure.

"Ponies," said she, "are like boys; they must needs have their lesson now and then. The more severe the lesson, the more effective. But disobedience usually leaves its scar. Sometimes it is only an expression left upon the face; sometimes it is not visible to the eye at all; but the scar is there, whether it be the disfiguring of the body or merely a little unseen, unsuspected hurt, deep down in the heart, it is there. And it affects, according to its magnitude, all after life."

And the Crackers understood.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE ALLIGATORS.

THE Crackers came in one morning with some very wonderful news, — *good* news it was to the people all around the lake. Bijou must have thought it good news, also, if he could have had an opinion on the subject.

The old blind alligator was dead. His ugly carcass had been washed upon the shore by the waves that very morning.

Upon investigation he was found to be totally blind, both eyes having been put out evidently by a bullet that had glanced them, without striking that vital spot, which alone deals death to the alligator, just *between* the eyes.

"But the last bullet brought him down, mother," said Joe. "The last bullet went 'slam home,' as Mr. Joiner says."

"And who *slammed* it, may I inquire?" said the Mate, at which the Crackers laughed heart-

ily, and the *little* Cracker cried, "Why, don't you know? It was the Joiner boys. They were out in our boat, — the one we gave them, — hunting 'gators for a man at Jacksonville who keeps a curiosity store. They had their father's gun, and when the big 'gator came along out of the water and spread himself out to dry on the shore, Jake just dropped the boat around to a point near by and got out, and tipped around to the blind alligator's head and chunked a bullet into his old noodle that laid him out, *I* tell you."

"Why, what a description," laughed the Mate, who perceived at once that the killing of the blind alligator had worked a change in the boys' respect for their young neighbors. "And *then* what happened?"

"Why," said James, "the waves took him off, for he made a lunge, you may be sure, and

the boys didn't know for certain that he was dead until this morning, when the men found him washed up again. The boys said they were 'mighty glad, so's their pappy wouldn't whoop 'em for stealing the gun.'"

"And when they investigated him," it was Joe's turn to add his testimony to the recital, "they found him to be *totally* blind."

"And did the investigation find him to be totally deaf also?" said the Mate. At which the Crackers looked dubious for a moment, until the *middle* Cracker caught the twinkle in the Mate's eye and took his cue from it.

"I think not, mother," said he, "because when found nobody said anything about his not having any ears, though they did say he had no eyes."

The Mate laughed heartily over this clever retort upon the part of the *middle* Cracker.

"That reminds me," said she, "of a story I once read of a man who was supposed to have been lost at sea. He was the heir to a great estate, it seems, and his friends took measures at once for finding his corpse, 'for decent burial.' In all the leading journals there were advertisements for him; their notices informed the public that the missing dead man might be

'easily identified by a red head, a game leg, and an impediment in his speech. Also he was a trifle near-sighted.'"

Still, for all the joking, the Mate was truly glad the old terror had been slain.

"I hope," said she, "we will have no more alligator adventures, but shall be free from the horrid creatures, their presence and their depredations, from this time forth and forever. We are becoming civilized citizens; let the alligators and the wildcats understand that."

In spite of the wish, however, she was destined to hear a good deal more of the ugly inhabitants of the lake. It was about this time that Florida began to attract the universal attention of Northerners seeking a milder winter climate. Each winter the immigration had increased, until she could scarcely entertain her guests.

With the coming of strangers a new enterprise had opened up, — the manufacture of bags, pockets, purses, and belts, from the skin of alligators.

In addition to this, as if *Dame Fashion* had determined to assist the Crackers in ridding themselves of their pests, the baby alligators began to be wanted.

Souvenirs, — everybody must have an alligator to carry home and exhibit to their friends at the North. The "man in Jacksonville," who kept the "curiosity store," had notified the lakeshore people that he would purchase at fifty cents each every baby alligator brought or sent "in good condition" to his house at Jacksonville.

A tempting offer to the Cracker element living along the lakes, to whom fifty cents seemed a rare prize for the "varmints."

Mr. Bus Joiner went into the business of collecting and shipping alligators more briskly, perhaps, than he had ever been known to go into anything. Unless, as his wife suggested, "it mought be his victuals."

There was a regular tri-weekly steamer on the lake at this time, thanks to the orange groves, and so the speculator found no difficulty in getting his stock to Jacksonville "in good condition."

Twice each week he shipped a keg of alligators, *via* the lake, the Ocklawaha River and the St. Johns, to the market at Jacksonville.

"Why, Mis' Parish," he said to the Mate one morning, as he crossed the yard according to his custom, that being "a nigh cut" to the

water, "I be gettin' rich a-sellin' baby 'gators. I made ten dollars last week, an' eight the week afore that. I aims to make twenty this week. One o' the hands on you-unses place hev told me uv a place over on the Long Islint whar they air plentifuller than ye ever see. I'm aimin' ter git thar this mornin', if them young raskils o' mine hain't took 'n' took the boat slam off."

"The boat is down there," said the Mate, indicating the point below where she had seen the boys leave it to follow her own boys on a gopher hunt. "The boat is down there; if you hurry a little you can get off before the boys return. I saw them going up to the grove with my boys to hunt gopher tortoise. But I tell you, Mr. Joiner, it is a very uncertain business, hunting alligators, and *I* think the risk overbalances the profit. Look out you don't go the way of the white sow."

"Lor," said the speculator in "baby 'gators," with a knowing grin, "womens allus thinks that erway. My wife thinks jest like yeou thinks. That's natchel fur womens. They're skerry."

The Mate did not feel disposed to argue the matter; she had sounded a warning, without

effect, and she had no more to say on the subject.

But as she saw the man rowing off to the island, a great pity rose in her heart.

He was so ignorant; what else could be expected of him, than that he should seize each and any opportunity that offered for making a little money?

Watching him thus, rowing away upon his dangerous errand, she thought of her own boys, the three darling little Crackers, and again she resolved that their new tutor must come at once, — just as soon as they were moved into the new house. "And there must be books ordered," she said, aloud, her eyes still fixed upon the fast fading boat. "Books are the great foundation of all manhood. Good books, good men; bad books, doubtful men. I shall order a carefully selected little library for them before I sleep. I would not have my boys grow up into — *that*, — not for the wealth of a world."

And again she nodded towards the retreating rowboat.

Meanwhile Mr. Bus Joiner entertained very different views as he paddled away to his destination.

"Ef I ketch fifty it ud make twenty-five dollars," he calculated. "But Lor', I hain't got no use fur all that thar money. I declar' to goodness ef I ain't gittin' right down graspin', 'sociatin' ez I hev been a-doin' uv with the rich o' this worl'. Useter be I could manage on a dollar or so oncet in a while, with the help o' the good Lord what chucked the lake with trouit an' the swammocks with wild meat and palmetter cabbage. Lor', but things hev changed, — changed mightily!"

The change, or thoughts of it, seemed to affect him greatly, for he dropped the oar in the water slowly, as if lost in thought, though he gave no further expression to his opinions, and soon the boat touched the shore of the Long Island, and the old Cracker landed.

The inevitable snack, that had occupied the seat with him, seemed to have become a kind of burden to him. He intended making a tour of the island; it would be too late for the snack before he returned, and it would come "onhandy," he argued, "ter fetch it round all the way."

Therefore, in order to rid himself of the burden, and at the same time settle the quandary, he sat down on the edge of the boat

and ate his lunch before starting upon his explorations.

"I guess hit'll settle *hit*," he said, as he opened the tin bucket and began operations upon the corn bread, fried bacon, and turtle eggs that Mrs. Joiner had "put up" for his dinner.

It was not ten o'clock when he set the bucket back in the boat and started around the island on the search for "baby 'gators."

He intended to make a circuit of the island really, but concluded he had best cross to "t'other side" and take it "half 'n half, ez t'ware."

So he went across, taking as straight line as possible. In less than an hour he had reached the shore at a point almost directly opposite that upon which he had left the boat. Then he turned to the right, "fur luck," he told himself, and started, keeping near the shore, back to his boat.

When he had gone about half the distance he suddenly stopped; his eyes seemed ready to burst their sockets, so wonderful was the sight upon which he had stumbled. A fortune, a full fortune to *him*, was lying there at his very feet, basking in the sun.

"Full a hunderd," he muttered, as he tipped carefully into their midst and began to seize upon the small, wriggling, serpent-like creatures, the baby alligators.

He thrust them into his bosom, making a hurried calculation the while. Now and then a harmless sting told him that even baby alligators were "bornded with thar teeth."

Fifty, — he had caught an even fifty, when, seeing one somewhat larger than the rest, he made a grab for it, and caught it, intending to carry it along in his hand.

But the alligator was not to be so easily carried off. It gave a sharp, queer kind of cry, and almost instantly the old female appeared at the water's edge.

She seemed to comprehend at one glance that her family was being carried off,

and in two minutes she had rushed to the rescue.

The robber dropped the alligator he was carrying, and ran. But the mother was between him and the boat, and in order to reach it he must pass her.

She understood his design, he thought, for she put herself directly in his path and began to lash at him with her tail.

At the same moment the alligators he had concealed in his bosom, hearing the snoring of the old one, began to reply to it. This seemed to enrage the creature so that she would certainly have killed the would-be robber could she have reached him.

Realizing that he must rid himself of his spoil, Mr. Joiner began to tear the alligators from his bosom and to throw them out to his pursuer, while he struck into the hammock to find, if possible, an opening to the spot where his boat lay.

He succeeded in getting rid of all the alligators except one. That one had wriggled around to his back, and he could not reach it. And all the while the creature kept up that horrid crying noise that called the mother to pursuit.

Breathless, pale, and frightened, Mr. Joiner reached the boat. His skin was torn, his body a mass of bites and bruises, when he tossed the chain into the skiff and tumbled in after it, leaving the mad alligator on the shore, so close upon him that he received a parting lash from her tail as he scrambled into the boat.

He pulled out as speedily as might be ; when at a safe distance, and somewhat recovered from his fright, he placed the oars in the bottom of the boat, and, allowing her to drift for a moment, he thrust his hand into his bosom and drew out the remaining 'gator, looked at it steadily a moment, — it was the last of the "big fortune" that had sunned in the sand at his feet, — then he quietly dropped it into the lake.

"Money made that easy air boun' ter be onhealthy," he said, as he resumed the oars. "I ware teached ez hit ware ter be 'arned by the sweat o' the brow, an' not picked up in the sand."

And from that time forth, nobody ever heard of the keg of baby alligators being shipped "twicet a week" to the house in Jacksonville.

Mr. Joiner's financial ambitions seemed to have adapted themselves again to "a dollar now and then," with which he was to all appearances content.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE NEW HOUSE.

Truly, the pioneers had prospered. "The grove will pay for itself in another year," said the Captain, as he stood at the door of the *new house*, the Mate at his side, watching the three figures coming up from the wharf where the steamer had touched a moment to get the last of the oranges, waiting to be shipped to New York.

The new house was finished at last. It was one of those roomy old-time plantation houses, with deep galleries, and wide sunny halls and windows that reached from floor to ceiling looking out upon the lake: that sheet of sparkling, sunshiny water for which the Mate had never been able to find a name sufficiently expressive of its beauty.

To the right of the front gallery stood the palm grove, with beds here and there, of natural flowers, crimson camelias and white, scarlet geraniums, and begonias of every order.

Yellow jasmine and climbing roses were everywhere. The dainty smilax reached out its tender tendrils to clasp the sturdy palm, while citron, lime, and cocoanut made a rare "annex," as the Mate was pleased to call it, to the palms; the whole being *backed* by the orange-trees that stood between the new house and the old.

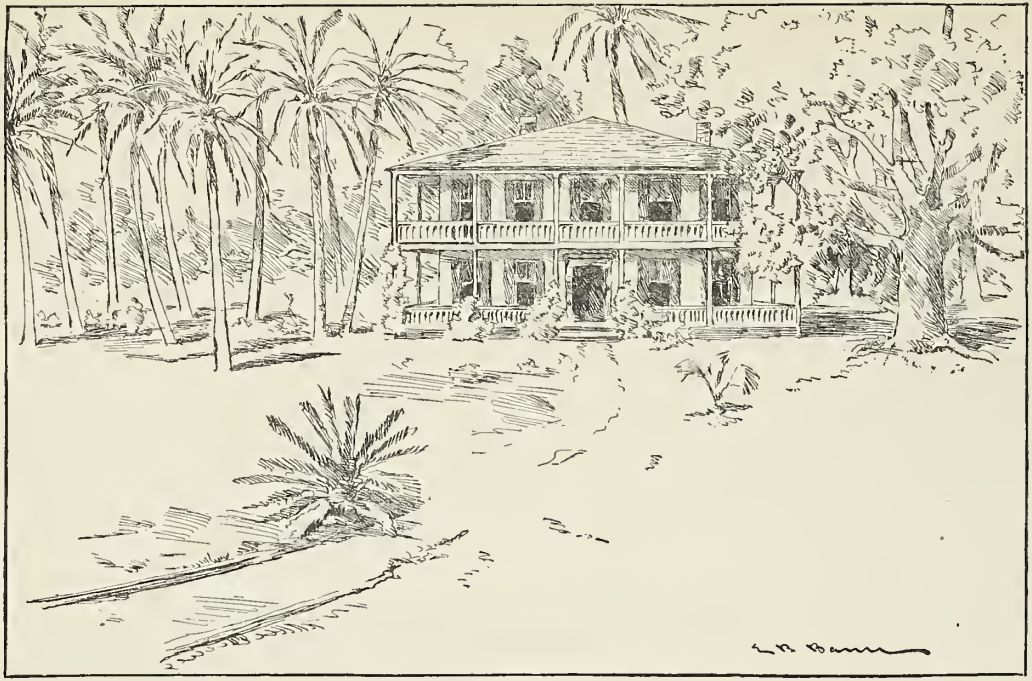
"Yes," — the Mate nestled her cheek against the Captain's sleeve, — "the lines have fallen to us in pleasant places."

It was their first evening in the new house; everything was in order, except the hanging of a few pictures; even Polly, from her perch at the sitting-room window, was calling, lustily:

"Pretty little Jacko! Poor little Jacko! Funny little Jacko!"

And from the roof of the long piazza, to which height the new chain gave him access, the delighted monkey rubbed his little brown stomach and chattered a response, of whose meaning he alone was in possession. It was doubtless satisfactory to the parrot, however, for she flapped her green wings and shouted "Ha! ha! ha!" in her most musical key.

The steamer, with the oranges, passed on in a track of crimson sunlight that faded into the



THE NEW HOUSE.

dullish afterglow as the sun went down, somewhere beyond the lake, and the three little Crackers were called in to their first supper in the new house.

"Boys," said the Mate, when they were all seated about the table, "I wish a little help after supper. I am going to hang the Governor of Alabama."

Then they had a great laugh at the mother's expense; one asked if he was to be hung by the *thumbs;* another thought it should be by the *heels*, while the *big* Cracker suggested that "men were generally hung 'by the *neck* until they were dead.'"

"And now," said the Mate, when the laugh had subsided, "we must look around for a name for our new place. Put on your thinking-caps, my boys; everybody must have a part in this. I have a fancy, somehow, for a name that has *villa* after it, or to it."

"To distinguish us from the natives, mother?" asked the *little* Cracker, with a chuckle that decided the fate of the *villa* immediately.

"No," replied the Mate; "since I have really 'come to stay,' to be one of them, I shall not live in a *villa*. Suggest something,

everybody. Captain! Joe! James! Suggestions! Suggestions are in order. What shall we call our Florida home?"

And the Mate, crossing her great-grandmother's silver knife and fork upon her plate, was, she announced, "ready to receive nominations."

"Call it 'Crow's Nest,'" said Joe; "it is so high and homelike."

"Call it 'Buzzard's Roost,'" scoffed the Mate, "or 'Chicken Coop,' or 'Turkey Top,' or something after any other convenient fowl or bird. Anything but a '*crow*.' Let us hear from you, James."

"How would 'Lake House' do?" said the *middle* Cracker. "It is so near the lake, and on one of her highest bluffs; and it certainly *is* a house, mother."

"Then we might call it 'Boat House' just as appropriately," laughed the Mate. "No boys, you have not touched my idea, yet. Cracker Jack, let us hear from you."

The *little* Cracker very gravely followed his mother's example of laying aside his knife and fork.

"Your great-great-grandmother's," whispered the *big* Cracker. Jack paid no heed, however,

to the sly suggestion that was intended to upset the gravity with which he entered upon the important business before him.

"Mother," said the dear *little* Cracker, "let's build a town."

"A — '*town?*'"

The Mate came very near upsetting her great-grandmother's coffee-urn into her lap.

"Yessum," said the Cracker. "A town; and let's name the town instead of the house. There are nearly a hundred men employed on our two places, uncle's and father's. Some of them have brought their families with them, and I heard uncle say the others would like to do so. Two-thirds of these men are white, I heard father say that; and these men, with us and the Joiners, are quite enough to start a town. Let's do it, and call it 'Sweet Orange.'"

"Why, bless the boy, what a head for business," said the Captain. The Mate screamed "Mercy me!" and began an involuntary applause with the tips of her great-grandmother's knife and fork.

"We will do it," said the Captain. "I shall open a store, and build a church, and set up a blacksmith's shop for Joiner, who is 'toler'ble

handy' about business like that. Yes, mother, we will '*build a town.*'"

"That reminds me," said the Mate, "of my old Latin class. There was one great dunce

in the class who had managed somehow to pull along as far as the Reader. It was Bullion's old Reader, and I remember the exact sentence. It was book sixth of the Roman history. The sentence begins '*Anno urbis*

conditæ sexcentesimo septuagesimo sexto, L. Licinio —'

"At examination time, which was a great day in those times, — and the examination was always oral, and the teachers were always nervous for fear their pupils would fail to do them as much credit as would be expected, for the 'friends and acquaintances' of the school were expected to be present, and it was considered a great disgrace to 'miss,' that is, not to be able to answer every question put to you, — well, the Latin class was called, and as luck or skilful manœuvring on the part of the teacher would have it, our dunce was the first one called upon to exhibit her ability in translating.

"She opened her book, and startled both school and faculty by announcing to the hall full of visitors that '*Anno built a city.*' I am afraid Jack's town will be, like Anno's, a mistake in translation. Still, Captain, I — "

She put her great-grandmother's silver tongs into the sugar bowl, lifted three lumps, — they were not *blocks* in those days, but *lumps*, — dropped them into the Captain's cup that had been sent back, like Oliver Twist's bowl, for "more," poured in the cream, the coffee, and

then (nobody else had spoken, either; they knew those *grand pauses* of the Mate's always meant something *to come*) she spoke:

"It isn't a bad idea, — no, it" — another pause — "it is a — really good thought. *We'll do it*, Captain. We will build a town and call it 'Sweet Orange.' Only, we will — *I* will — write to old Tiger Tail, the chief, formerly at Okahumpka, but lately removed to a settlement on the Indian River, and get the *Indian* word for 'Sweet Orange.' And, since one great thought suggests a thousand, I shall also ask the chief for the name of our lake. It ought to be 'Sunbeams,' though it is just as like to be the 'Lake of the Spotted Toad' as anything else.

"I shall write to-night. And while we are about it, Captain, suppose you do a little corresponding on the subject of the steam yacht you promised the pioneers. Since they have learned to 'paddle their own canoe' to perfection, build cities, and otherwise interest themselves in the matters of progress, I think they are entitled to promotion."

This suggestion won the hearty approval of the three little Crackers. They were on the verge of forgetting themselves and giving the

Mate a 'rousing cheer,' but were prevented by her rising at the very first intimation of such a thing and declaring she was going, at once, to write the letter to old Tiger Tail over on Indian River.

CHAPTER XVI.

YALAHA!

THE three little Crackers had been occupying, with their parents, the new house for about one month, when one bright morning, early, the Captain ordered the "no-top" brought to the door, and drove off to the post-office at Okahumpka.

He had acted very mysteriously, the boys thought, asking none of them to accompany him, and giving such short replies to their questions they could not fail to understand that he did not care to be interrogated.

In fact, matters had been "kind o' dark," the Crackers thought, for several weeks now.

The Captain and Mate had held several private conferences, to which nobody had been admitted except Uncle James, who had ridden over twice upon some mysterious mission.

The boys felt somehow as if they were badly treated. And when the Captain drove off in

that indifferent way, they felt as if they no longer had any say-so in matters at all.

Then, too, the Mate had managed to send them upon some kind of errand, as far from the wharf as possible, whenever the steamer came in, — as if determined to take from them even that one poor little pleasure.

They were not in a very good frame of mind that morning when the Captain drove off.

"S'posin' we take a row, anyhow," said Jack; "it will help us forget how we are not wanted about the house."

"'S'posin'' you try to talk like Mr. Joiner's Jake," said Joe. "I believe you could 'a-mos' do it."

"Boys! Boys!" the Mate was calling from the front door. "Do you not wish to go over to uncle's to spend the day?"

The Crackers were about to shout a hearty affirmative, when James, glancing across the water, perceived that the steamer was coming in.

"Look there," said he. "Just wants to get rid of us. No, mother," he shouted, "we would rather watch the steamer."

"Boys!" And this time there *was* a hint

of impatience, alarm indeed, in the Mate's voice. "Boys, I say, come here instantly."

There was no mistaking *that* call, whatever doubt they may have felt regarding the first.

"Boys," said she, when sulking, fretful, and impatient, they stood at her side, "you are to go at once to Drake Point. Your uncle knows that — ah!" The Mate had been very near to telling a secret.

"Your uncle is expecting you. You are not to return until William calls for you with Bijou and the 'no-top.' You are to be—"

"Mother,"— Cracker James's eyes were fixed upon the incoming steamer,—"isn't the steamer *towing* something this way?"

"You are to go at once," said the Mate. "And —"

"But, mother, the steam—"

"*Will* you let the steamer be?" cried the Mate. "Ike is waiting with the buggy from the Point to carry you over there. Go!" And the Mate actually took the *middle* Cracker by the shoulders and, turning him about, *pushed* him into the hall and out at the back door, where she hurried the three into the buggy and started them off with all des-

patch, just at the moment when the steamer whistled for the wharf.

Even then Cracker James looked back to say:

"Just please let us see her come —"

"Go!" she commanded, and thrusting her fingers into her ears, the Mate ran in, and, dropping into a chair, laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks.

Indeed she laughed until William put his head in at the window to say:

"Miss Lou, hit's come."

Then she remembered, and, seizing her garden hat, ran down to the wharf to welcome "hit" into port.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon before the "no-top," with Bijou in tow, started for the Point.

It was nearly an hour later when the Mate heard the boys talking to the monkey at the back door. She went out at once to them, and at once they knew that something had happened. There were to be no more secrets to

shut them off from each other; the old good, friendly times had come back again; they read it in her face before she led them in, then out again at the front door.

Several gentlemen were standing on the wharf, among them the Captain; and the Mate said, as she led the way down to join them, with the three little Crackers in tow:

"Your father brought two gentlemen home with him from Okahumpka to-day. They came that far on the train."

Before the Crackers could reply, they had reached the steps leading down to the wharf. Suddenly they stopped; and such an expression as came into their faces, and such a shout as went up from three little throats, it would have done your heart good to have seen and heard.

Lying upon the water, as quietly at home as if she had been there always, was the daintiest, sauciest little green yacht, with red and white curtains waving a merry "how-do" to the astonished little Crackers staring at her as if she had suddenly dropped upon them from the clouds.

A graceful line of smoke was curling upwards from a funny little stack, and while they

stood staring, a saucy little whistle sounded, and the Captain's voice shouted:

"All aboard the *Dot*."

The *Dot!* What a darling little *Dot* it was! The Mate led them down to the gentlemen, who were evidently waiting to go aboard with them.

And then, for the first time, the Crackers remembered there was company, and that they were called upon to pay their respects to the guests, who, so far, had received very little notice from them.

The Mate said nothing by way of introduction, and, thinking it rather peculiar, the *big* Cracker glanced from his mother to the visitors a moment, and then he stepped forward, and, removing his hat, offered his hand to one of the guests, while he cried:

"Why, mother! Mother, if it isn't the Governor of Alabama!"

"And *this* gentleman," said the Mate, when the three Crackers had shaken the hand of their Alabama friend, "is our new tutor, Mr. Long. Mr. Long, let me present to you the three little Crackers from down in Dixie."

And when the Crackers had each given a

hand to their new instructor, the Captain called, "All aboard for the *Dot*," and the happy company "took passage."

The Captain was at the engine; he had been an excellent engineer in the first days of his manhood. He called to the Mate, as she was about to settle herself comfortably among the cushions that William had brought down, to know if she would take the rudder and direct the course of the *Dot*.

"The rudder?" cried the Mate. "Why, I do not so much as know where it is."

Then there was a great laugh at the Mate's expense, and the Captain sent a momentary thrill of alarm into the hearts of the three Crackers by announcing that it was impossible to give the company a ride, unless some one should take the rudder.

It was a great relief to the boys when the new tutor rose and offered to pilot the yacht, which offer was very cheerfully accepted by the engineer.

He proved such a skilful pilot, the Captain laughingly inquired if he had learned his trade in Tennessee waters.

"No," said he; "our streams are as fair as any, but our people have not learned, as yet, to

seek for pleasure from them. I once belonged to a yachting club at college in New England; I like boating."

The Crackers liked him from that moment: he had been a boy himself; he liked boating. Oh, they would have good times on the *Dot* with the new tutor at the rudder.

They were very happy Crackers indeed. They examined every nook and cranny about the saucy little *Dot*, not forgetting the long, horn-like tin box, in which the Captain had stowed the "ship's papers." They read his license as engineer, giving him permission to run the *Dot;* then they examined the rules and the signals, and wished for the big steamer to pass, in order that they might salute her.

And at last, when they had seen all there was to see, the Mate called for attention while she removed from her pocket two letters.

One was a very pompous, important-looking document, and bore the Washington, D. C., postmark.

The other was a small, queer-looking yellow envelope, plentifully toned with finger-marks, and adorned with the funniest zigzag writing

that had ever fallen under the eyes of the three Crackers.

"This," said the Mate, tapping the small yellow envelope with her forefinger, "is from my friend, Tiger Tail, on the Indian River. It is written, however, by Tom Tiger, son of the chief, for reasons that you will soon understand."

She opened the letter (it was more than three weeks old, but the Crackers did not suspect it), and read it aloud, though the company, after examining the writing, wondered how she had been able to get the meaning out of those curious letters. It said:

"Got your letter. In our language sweet orange is Ya-la-ha. Sour orange is Ya-lap-pa. Your lake is Lake of Sunbeams, in our language *Astatula*.

"My son Tom Tiger writes the letter, the old chief know not to write. From

"THE CHIEF TIGER TAIL."

The Mate folded the letter amid general applause. "I am so glad to get the name of our lake," she said. "And to think it is truly, after all, the Lake of Sunbeams! I was so afraid it would be Spotted Toad. And our town, that is to be, is Yalaha. Now boys,

pronounce it: *Ya-la-ha!* Ya*la*ha; with the accent on the second syllable. Good! Now you may give three cheers, I see you can scarcely keep them down, one for Yalaha, one for the *Dot*, and one for the Lake of Sunbeams, Astatula."

"And a *tiger* for the old chief," said the Governor of Alabama, quickly. And the Crackers, the Mate, the Captain, the new tutor, and even the Governor himself responded to the very best of their ability.

"And now," said the Mate, opening the official-looking document from Washington, "we will proceed with our town."

The document advised that from that time forth a post-office would be enrolled among the government's list of offices, to be called "*Yallaha.*"

The Mate dropped the letter upon her lap and groaned. The seal had been set, the stamp ordered; the thing was done, and there was no undoing it. Yallaha! And the old chief's word was Yalaha. The Captain, poor fellow, had, in making the application, thoughtlessly added an "*l*" to Tom Tiger Tail's spelling. The Mate was in despair.

"Now, isn't it *too* bad!" said she. "Isn't it

just too bad to spoil our pretty Indian name so!"

"Oh," said the Captain, as he let off a little more steam and signalled the steersman to head the *Dot* homeward, "it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter in the least, Sue; one *l* more or less is nothing, and nobody else is going to write to old Tiger Tail to find out if we have spelled our town correctly. It doesn't matter at all."

"*But*," insisted the Mate, "it *does* matter. Why, I can hear Mr. Bus Joiner this blessed minute, in my mind, explaining to the thousands who are coming here by and by, to purchase land, and to make orange groves, that the name of our town is '*Yallerha*.'"

And so indeed it proved. The old Cracker, and the Cracker's descendants, could never teach their tongues the beautiful Indian Yalaha.

To the strangers, however, who have drifted into the place, though they sometimes wonder at Uncle Sam's poor spelling, and sometimes talk of petitioning him against the obnoxious "*l*," the rippling rhythm of the Indian word appeals at once; and at once they accept it: Yalaha, sweet orange.

But to the natives who are not affected by the march of progress, the home of the three little Crackers, away down in Dixie, is to this good day "Yallerhar."

Finis

GIFT BOOK SERIES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

Tall 12mo, 1 Volume, Price, $1.00 Each

A series of well-written, popular copyright books, by well-known authors. Each story has been carefully selected with a view to making a series of clean, wholesome, and interesting books, especially suitable as presents for boys and girls from eight to sixteen. Each book is profusely illustrated with full-page and text illustrations, the type is clear and good, the binding rich and attractive, and each volume has a separate cover design.

LITTLE BERMUDA. By MARIA LOUISE POOL, author of "Dally," "A Redbridge Neighborhood," "In a Dike Shanty," "Friendship and Folly," etc.

THE WILD RUTHVENS. A HOME STORY. By CURTIS YORK. Illustrated by E. F. Manning.

A capital tale of a lot of lovable, romping children. The story has achieved a great success in England, where it has reached its 60,000. It is very similar in style and interest to Miss Alcott's "Little Men" and "Little Women."

KING PIPPIN. A STORY FOR CHILDREN. By MRS. GERARD FORD, author of "Pixie." With forty illustrations by Florence N. Cooper.

One of the most delightful books for young folks which has been issued for some time. The reader, young or old, whatever his temperament, will be arrested, benefited, and absorbed.

THE ADVENTURES OF A SIBERIAN CUB. Translated from the Russian of Slibitski by LEON GOLSCHMANN. With twenty-four illustrations by Winifred Foster.

This is indeed a book which will be hailed with delight, especially by children who love to read about animals.

THE WOODRANGER. By G. W. BROWN.

The first of a series of five volumes entitled "The Woodranger Tales." Although each book is complete in itself, the same characters will be continued throughout the series. This series, like the "Pathfinder Tales" of J. Fenimore Cooper, will combine historical information relating to early pioneer days in America with interesting adventures in the backwoods.

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY
212 Summer Street, Boston

THREE LITTLE CRACKERS. By WILL ALLEN DROMGOOLE, author of "The Farrier's Dog," etc., with fifty text and full-page illustrations.

A fascinating story for boys and girls. The adventures of a family of Alabama children who move to Florida and grow up in the South are described, with the combined humor and pathos which give this gifted young Southern author so high a place in the ranks of American writers.

THREE CHILDREN OF GALILEE. A LIFE OF CHRIST FOR THE YOUNG. By JOHN GORDON. Beautifully illustrated with more than one hundred text and full-page illustrations of Holy Land scenery.

There has long been a need for a Life of Christ for the young, and this book has been written in answer to this demand. That it will meet with great favor is beyond question, for parents have recognized that their boys and girls want something more than a Bible Story, a dry statement of facts, and that, in order to hold the attention of the youthful readers, a book on this subject should have life and movement as well as scrupulous accuracy and religious sentiment.

MISS GRAY'S GIRLS; OR, SUMMER DAYS IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS. By JEANNETTE A. GRANT. With about sixty illustrations in half-tone and pen-and-ink sketches of Scottish scenery.

A delightfully told story of a summer trip through Scotland, somewhat out of the beaten track.

THE FAIRY FOLK OF BLUE HILL. A STORY OF FOLK-LORE. By LILY F. WESSELHOEFT, author of "Sparrow the Tramp," etc., with fifty-five illustrations from original drawings by Alfred C. Eastman.

A new volume by Mrs. Wesselhoeft, well known as one of our best writers for the young, and who has made a host of friends among the young people who have read her delightful books. This book ought to interest and appeal to every child who has read her earlier works.

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY

212 Summer Street, Boston

FEATS ON THE FIORD. A TALE OF NORWEGIAN LIFE. By HARRIET MARTINEAU. With about sixty original illustrations and a colored frontispiece.

This admirable book, read and enjoyed by so many young people, deserves to be brought to the attention of parents in search of wholesome reading for their children to-day. It is something more than a juvenile book, being really one of the most instructive books about Norway and Norwegian life and manners ever written, well deserving liberal illustration and the luxury of good paper now given to it.

SONGS AND RHYMES FOR THE LITTLE ONES. Compiled by MARY WHITNEY MORRISON (Jenny Wallis). New edition, with an introduction by Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney, and eight illustrations.

No better description of this admirable book can be given than Mrs. Whitney's happy introduction.

"One might almost as well offer June roses with the assurance of their sweetness, as to present this lovely little gathering of verse which announces itself, like them, by its own deliciousness. . . . The most bewitching book of songs for little people that we have ever known."

THE YOUNG PEARL DIVERS. A STORY OF AUSTRALIAN ADVENTURE BY LAND AND BY SEA. By LIEUT. H. PHELPS WHITMARSH, author of "The Mysterious Voyage of the *Daphne*," etc. Illustrated with twelve full-page half-tones, by H. Burgess, whose drawings have exactly caught the spirited tone of the narrative.

This is a splendid story for boys, by an author who writes in vigorous and interesting language, of scenes and adventures with which he is personally acquainted.

TIMOTHY DOLE. By JUNIATA SALSBURY. With twenty-five or thirty illustrations from drawings and pen-and-ink sketches.

The title gives no clue to the character of the book, but the reader who begins the first chapter will not stop until he has finished the whole. The youthful hero, and a genuine hero he proves to be, starts from home, loses his way, meets with startling adventures, finds friends, kind and many, grows to be a manly man, and is able to devote himself to bettering the condition of the poor in the mining region of Pennsylvania, the scene of his early life and adventures.

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY
212 Summer Street, Boston

OTHER NEW JUVENILES

OLD FATHER GANDER. A Book of Rhymes and Pictures for Young People. By Walter Scott Howard.

1 vol., oblong quarto, cloth, decorative $2.00

The illustrations are so striking and fascinating that the book will appeal to young people aside from the fact even of the charm and humor of the songs and rhymes.

THE CROCK OF GOLD. A New Book of Fairy Tales. By S. Baring Gould, author of "Mehalah," "Old Country Life," "Old English Fairy Tales," etc. With twenty-five full-page illustrations by F. D. Bedford.

1 vol., tall 12mo, cloth, decorative, gilt top . . . $1.50

THE VOYAGE OF THE AVENGER. In the Days of the Dashing Drake. By Henry St. John, author of "A Middy of Nelson's Day," etc. With twenty-five full-page illustrations by Paul Hardy.

1 vol., tall 12mo, cloth, decorative, gilt top, 400 pages $1.50

A boy's book of adventure, the scene of which is laid in that stirring period of colonial extension when England's famous naval heroes encountered the ships of Spain, both at home and in the West Indies.

A CHILD'S HISTORY OF SPAIN. By Leonard Williams, author of "Ballads and Songs of Spain," etc.

1 vol., small 12mo, with frontispiece, cloth, gilt top . $0.75

The author describes in familiar language the reconquest of Spain from the Moors, and her subsequent history down to the present year, and the peace concluded in 1898 with the United States of America. Throughout the work the narrative and dramatic is aimed at, rather than the merely statistical, but Mr. Williams's ideal may be best summed up by a quotation from his preface. He says: "It seems to me that there is little to gain and much to confuse, by insisting too minutely on the dry dates relating to the Christian and Moorish sovereigns who succeed one another, often with bewildering rapidity, in Aragon, Castile, Navarre, and Moslem Spain.

"Now and again, however, a great fighting king stands forth, head and shoulders above the rest, a landmark, so to speak, amid the wilderness. Him I have endeavored to throw into relief, so that even a child may be able to point to him and exclaim, 'Here, at least, I find a substantial fact and figure.'"

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY

212 Summer Street, Boston

COSY CORNER SERIES

OF

CHARMING JUVENILE STORIES

Price, Fifty Cents Each

THE FORTUNES OF THE FELLOW. By WILL ALLEN DROMGOOLE.
THE GATE OF THE GIANT SCISSORS. By ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON.
THE SLEEPING BEAUTY. A Modern Version. By MARTHA BAKER DUNN.
THE YOUNG ARCHER. By CHARLES E. BRIMBLECOM.
A LITTLE PURITAN REBEL. By EDITH ROBINSON.
THE FARRIER'S DOG AND HIS FELLOW. By WILL ALLEN DROMGOOLE.
THE PRINCE OF THE PIN ELVES. By CHARLES LEE SLEIGHT.
A DOG OF FLANDERS. By "OUIDA."
THE NURNBERG STOVE. By "OUIDA."
OLE MAMMY'S TORMENT. By ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON.
THE LITTLE COLONEL. By ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON.
BIG BROTHER. By ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON.
A LOYAL LITTLE MAID. By EDITH ROBINSON.
THE LITTLE LAME PRINCE. By MISS MULOCH.
THE ADVENTURES OF A BROWNIE. By MISS MULOCH.
HIS LITTLE MOTHER. By MISS MULOCH.
WEE DOROTHY'S TRUE VALENTINE. By LAURA UPDEGRAFF.
LA BELLE NIVERNAISE. The Story of an Old Boat and Her Crew. By ALPHONSE DAUDET.
A GREAT EMERGENCY. By JULIANA HORATIA EWING.
THE TRINITY FLOWER. By JULIANA HORATIA EWING.
STORY OF A SHORT LIFE. By JULIANA HORATIA EWING.
JACKANAPES. By JULIANA HORATIA EWING.
RAB AND HIS FRIENDS. By DR. JOHN BROWN.
THE KING OF THE GOLDEN RIVER. A Legend of Stiria. By JOHN RUSKIN.
THE YOUNG KING. THE STAR CHILD. Two Tales.

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY
212 Summer Street, Boston

COSY CORNER SERIES.— Continued.

THE LITTLE COLONEL'S NEIGHBORS. By ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON.
A LITTLE DAUGHTER OF LIBERTY. By EDITH ROBINSON.
LITTLE KING DAVIE. By NELLIE HELLIS.
LITTLE PETERKIN VANDIKE. By CHARLES STUART PRATT.
THE MAKING OF ZIMRI BUNKER. By W. J. LONG.

COSY CORNER SERIES

FOR

OLDER READERS

A Series of Short Original Stories, or Reprints of Well-known Favorites, Sketches of Travel, Essays and Poems.

The books of this series answer a long-felt need for a half-hour's entertaining reading, while in the railway car, during the summer outing in the country or at the seaside, or by the evening lamp at home. They are particularly adapted for reading aloud, containing nothing but the best from a literary standpoint, and are unexceptionable in every way. They are printed from good type, illustrated with original sketches by good artists, and neatly bound in cloth. The size is a 16mo, not too large for the pocket.

Price, Fifty Cents Each

MEMORIES OF THE MANSE. GLIMPSES OF SCOTTISH LIFE AND CHARACTER. By ANNE BREADALBANE.
CHRISTMAS AT THOMPSON HALL. By ANTHONY TROLLOPE.
A PROVENCE ROSE. By LOUISA DE LA RAMÉ (OUIDA).
IN DISTANCE AND IN DREAM. By M. F. SWEETSER.
WILL O' THE MILL. By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

Published by L. C. PAGE AND COMPANY

212 Summer Street, Boston

Duke University Libraries
D00648658.